FACULTY OF PSYCHOLOGY
AND EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES

The logic of the database: In search of responsive social work

Jochen Devlieghere

Supervisor: Prof. dr. Rudi Roose

A dissertation submitted to Ghent University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Social Work

Academic year 2016–2017

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"Let us be grateful to the people who make us happy; they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom."

- **Marcel Proust**

Jochen, May 18th 2017

Table of contents

Chapter 1
General introduction **7**

Electronic Information Systems 9

Contemporary context and discourses 11

Managerialism 12
Risk reduction 13

Towards a responsive social work practice 14

A conversational practice 14
A transparent practice 15

Or a technical social work practice? 16

New Public Management 16
Lego bricks 16
Decontextualisation 17
The electronic eye 17
Screen-level bureaucrat 18

Research agenda 18

Policy-oriented research agenda 20
Organisation-oriented research agenda 21
Practice-oriented research agenda 21
Overview of the research gaps 22

Research outline 24

Problem statement 24
Research questions 25
Research aim 25

Research context 26

Child Welfare and Protection in Flanders 26
Integrated Child Welfare and Protection as ‘pièce de résistance’ 28

Methodological framework 32

A qualitative stance 32
A context review of the literature 32

Study 1 – Browsing through policy documents 34
Selection of the policy documents 34
Analysis of the policy documents 34
Study 2 – Interviewing key policy actors 35
Selection of the participants 35
Conducting the interviews 36
Analysis of the interviews 37
Study 3 – Interviewing managers 38
Selection of the participants 38
Conducting the interviews 40
Analysis of the interviews 41
Study 4 – Interviewing social practitioners 42
Selection of the participants 42
Conducting the interviews 43
Analysis of the interviews 44
Ethical dimensions 44
Overview of the chapters 46
Chapter 1 - Introduction 46
Chapter 2 - Governmental rationales 46
Chapter 3 - An area of ambiguity 46
Chapter 4 - A manager's perspective 46
Chapter 5 - Creating transparency: opportunities and pitfalls 46
Chapter 6 - In search of responsiveness 47
Chapter 7 - Discussion and concluding reflections 47
References 48

Chapter 2
Governmental rationales **59**

Introduction 63
Integrated Child Welfare and Protection 66
The logic of the database 67
Methodological framework 69
Findings 70
Matching 70

Legitimation 71
Creating uniformity 72
Discussion and concluding reflections 73
Acknowledgements 77
References 78

Chapter 3
An area of ambiguity 85
Introduction 89
The debate on EISs in social work 90
A managerial tendency 90
The social worker as a tweet-level bureaucrat 91
The government as a bogeyman 92
Methodological framework 92
Findings 95
Increasing efficiency 95
Generating information 96
Creating accountability 98
Discussion and concluding reflections 100
Study limitations 103
References 104

Chapter 4
A managers' perspective 109
Introduction 113
The current demand for accountability 115
EISs as facilitators of accountability 116
The role of managers 117
Methodology 118
Context 118
Data collection 119
Findings 121

The perspective of managers 121
The actions of managers 123
Discussion and concluding reflections 124
References 127

Chapter 5
Opportunities and pitfalls 131
Introduction 135
EISs in social work: an ongoing debate 136
The drive for transparency 136
The logic of the database 138
Child welfare and protection in flanders 138
A brief overview 138
Intersectoral Gateway 139
Methodological framework 141
Findings 142
EISs as a base for transparency 142
Pitfalls 144
Discussion and concluding remarks 147
References 150

Chapter 6
In search of responsiveness 155
Introduction 159
Electronic Information Systems 160
The presence of discretion 162
Methodological framework 163
Context 163
Design and data collection 164
Findings 165
Discussion and concluding remarks 168
References 172

Chapter 7
Concluding discussion **179**

Introduction 181

Central conclusions 182

Policy rationales for implementing EISs 183
The ambiguous nature of policy makers 184
Managers and their professional values 186
Creating workarounds at the front door 187

Where the shoe pinches 189

Social work as a minefield 189
Illusions and disillusions 190
Embracing ambiguity 193
Managers as facilitators 195
In search of responsive social work 196

The need for further research 198

References 201

Appendix I
Data Storage Fact Sheets **207**

Appendix II
Nederlandstalige samenvatting **229**

CHAPTER 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Electronic Information Systems

In 1972, Timms wrote that 'the history of recording in social work is as long as the history of modern social work' itself (Timms, 1972, p. 1). The author was indicating that social work has always been and always will be engaged with the gathering, recording, collecting and sharing of information. In the end, this information provides a resource for administrative procedures, for teaching and supervision, to improve practice skills and so on (Ames, 1999). Over the past few decades, though, these activities have gained much more significance and have even led to a so-called informational context (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Bradt, Roose, Bouverne-De Bie, & De Schryver, 2011; Garrett, 2005; Hall, Parton, Peckover, & White, 2010; Hudson, 2002; Parrot & Madoc-Jones, 2008; Parton, 2006; Steyaert, 1996). In this context, social workers are expected to record and process information about their activities with service users more than ever before, a development that has become even more prominent with the growth and ever-expanding potential of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Bradt et al., 2011; Garrett, 2005; Hall et al., 2010; Hill & Shaw, 2011; Hudson, 2002; Keymolen & Broeders, 2013; Parrot & Madoc-Jones, 2008; Parton, 2006, 2009; White, Wastell, Broadhurst, & Hall, 2010).

Although social services had already begun to use computerised technology in the 1960s (Ames, 1999), scholars such as Hill and Shaw (2011) point out that social work and ICT may seem rather strange bedfellows. 'After all, social work and computers seem to have very different logics' (Hill & Shaw, 2011, p. 2). This might explain why historically social work has been sceptical about the value of computerised systems (Baker, Warburton, Hodgkin, & Pascal, 2014; Carrilio, 2005; Gillingham, 2014; Parrot & Madoc-Jones, 2008). In that vein, Gillingham (2014) even refers to 'computer phobia' as social work has been quite reluctant to embrace the potential of ICT.

Notwithstanding social work's doubtfulness and resilience, information technology systems have become ubiquitous and widely spread amongst social services worldwide (Gillingham, 2011; Hudson, 2002; Munro, 2005; Parton, 2008; Wastell & White, 2014). This has resulted in the implementation of a great variety of heterogeneous Electronic Information Systems (EISs) amongst social services, such as decision-making and risk-assessment tools, data-recording systems, digital casework environments and many other variations (Carrilio, 2005; Cleaver et al., 2008; Falconer, Rhodes, Mena, & Reid, 2009; Garrett, 2005; Gillingham, 2011, 2015; Hill & Shaw, 2011; Keymolen &

Broeders, 2013; Mitchell & Sloper, 2008; Munro, 2005; Parrot & Madoc-Jones, 2008; White, Hall, & Peckover, 2009; White et al., 2010).

Examples worldwide

Examples abound of the worldwide proliferation of EISs in social work environments. For instance, Australia has introduced the Client Relationship Information System for Service Providers (CRISSP), an information and case management system that allows practitioners to record client information (Gillingham, 2011). In the United States, a Management Information System (MIS) was installed to strengthen a long-term home visiting programme known as Healthy Families America (HFA). The aim of this system is to perform a systematic assessment of new or expecting programmes so that those 'at a higher risk of parenting challenges could be offered home visiting services' (Falconer et al., 2009, p. 195). In Sweden, the 'Barns Behov I Centrum' (BBIC) or Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families was installed as a tool giving guidance on how the social services should handle signs of maltreatment amongst children. It is a comprehensive assessment tool that captures many aspects of a client's life and surrounding environment in order to gain a complete overview of the situation (Carlstedt & Jacobsson, 2017; Galanou, 2015).

Closer to home, the National Reference Index for High-Risk Youngsters, also referred to as the Child Index, was introduced in the Netherlands (Keymolen & Broeders, 2013; Lecluijze, 2015). It is described as 'an online aid for care professionals to quickly get in touch with each other' (Lecluijze, 2015, p. 10). Keymolen and Broeders (2013) explain that the Child Index was developed as a response to the 'public outcry about a number of well-publicised cases in which the tragic deaths of very small children were (at least) partially connected with a failing youth care system' (Keymolen & Broeders, 2013). One of the cases they refer to is the tragedy of the Maas-girl. In 2006, a twelve-year-old girl was found in the river Maas after her father killed her. The inquiry following her death identified a lack of co-operation between the several Child Welfare and Protection (CWP) services that were involved as one of the many reasons for insufficient vigilance in this case. This prompted the Dutch government to accelerate the introduction of the Child Index, which they believed would stimulate the sharing of information between professionals who were participating in the Dutch Centres for Youth and Family (Keymolen & Broeders, 2013). This, in turn, would enable the identification of children at

risk in the Netherlands and help to prevent new tragedies (Keymolen & Broeders, 2013; Lecluijze, 2015).

The parallel with the development of the Integrated Children System (ICS) and the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) in England is striking (Keymolen & Broeders, 2013). In 2000, England awoke to the death of eight-year-old Victoria Climbié. Similar to the Maas-girl in the Netherlands, she received multiple home visits from several CWP services in the period leading up to her death. However, owing to a lack of information-sharing all services involved failed to connect the dots, which explains why they were not able to prevent her from dying (Laming, 2003; White et al., 2009). As a result, the British government created a diversity of EISs in order to gather information on all children under 18 in England and to enable practitioners to share that information more quickly, aiming to identify children at risk at an early stage. At the same time, the British government also encouraged practitioners in the field to use a standard assessment tool designed to enable practitioners to build a thorough record of information about a child's needs. This would promote coordinated service provision to improve the child's wellbeing (Cleaver & Walker, 2004; Mitchell & Sloper, 2008; Munro, 2005; White et al., 2009).

Contemporary context and discourses

In one of her contributions, Munro states that 'to the man with a new hammer, every problem tends to be seen as a loose nail. To a government intent on developing e-government, every problem at present tends to be seen as a dearth of ICT' (Munro, 2005, p. 374). Munro thereby explains why governments around the world are responsible for steering and shaping what Garrett (2005) loosely refers to as the 'electronic turn'. Ultimately, governments are very keen to invest in EISs. They believe that these systems are capable of solving a wide range of organisational and social problems (Munro, 2005; Wastell & White, 2014). The above-mentioned developments in the Netherlands, the United States and England shed light on some of the problems – or nails if you like – that governments aim to solve by bringing EISs into the field of social work.

As we touch upon these problems throughout this dissertation, we will not discuss them in detail here. However, it is important that the reader is able to gain an understanding of the forces and political and social preoccupations that are influencing and steering the current era of EISs (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Gillingham, 2015; Munro, 2004, 2005; Parton, 1998). We will therefore first briefly discuss the current rise of managerialism and the preoccupation with

risk management, as these forces are generally considered to be decisive and pivotal for the current implementation of EISs in social work.

Managerialism

Managerialism relates to the political answer to the crisis of the welfare state in the late 20th century. At that time, a gradual increase in unemployment, together with a slow-down in economic growth and mounting inflation, encouraged politicians to search for vigorous solutions that were strong enough to tackle the economic and social issues they were confronted with at the time (Baines, 2010; Clarke & Newman, 1997; Hudson, 2003; Parton, 2008; Trevithick, 2014). One of the dominant solutions was – and still is – found in the neoliberal ideology of managerialism (Baines, 2010; Clarke & Newman, 1997; Jones, 2001; Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008; Trevithick, 2014; Tsui & Cheung, 2004). Baines describes this ideology as 'a set of political beliefs, values and practices that valorise the private market, economic rationalism, and individual, rather than collective, responsibility for social and individual ills' (Baines, 2010, pp. 11-12). It is this ideology that shaped not only the global market but service delivery and social work as well by introducing a new administrative and organisational system named New Public Management (NPM), more generally known as managerialism (Baines, 2010; Clarke & Newman, 1997; Jones, 2001; Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008; Trevithick, 2014; Tsui & Cheung, 2004). This managerial rhetoric derives from the idea that 'better management will resolve a wide range of economic and social problems' (Alford, 1997; Davis, 1997 in Tsui & Cheung, 2004, p. 437).

It therefore comes as no surprise that this stance values principles such as the importance of performance measurement (Aronson & Smith, 2010; Carrilio, 2005; Falconer et al., 2009), assessing the efficiency of social services so as to increase productivity (Baines, 2010; Clarke & Newman, 1997; Trevithick, 2014; Tsui & Cheung, 2004) and imposing financial discipline with the aim of cutting costs in public expenditure (Baines, 2010; Clarke & Newman, 1997; Trevithick, 2014; Tsui & Cheung, 2004). In the end, the perception is that every taxpayer has the right to know whether their money is spent in an efficient and useful way (Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Garrett, 2005; Gillingham & Graham, 2016; Munro, 2004; Walker, 2002). Walker argues that 'the current calls for accountability, while appearing to be theoretically neutral, are embedded within neo-liberal theories of governance' (Walker, 2002, p. 64). This development resonates with governments all over the world, which are attempting to make social work and social work practice more auditable,

emphasising the need for individual practitioners and especially for social services to be accountable for both their actions and their decisions (Falconer et al., 2009; Gillingham & Graham, 2016; Munro, 2004). In order to demonstrate that practitioners as well as social services are acting according regulations and in an efficient and effective way, they draw on data derived from EISs (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Clark, 2005; Munro, 2004, 2011).

Risk reduction

The current preoccupation with risk and risk reduction in social work, and CWP in particular, is rooted in the public responses to the tragedies, such as Victoria Climbié and Baby P. in the United Kingdom and Savanna and Maasgirl in the Netherlands (Lecluijze, 2015; Munro, 2011; White et al., 2009). During the aftermath and the public inquiries into these cases, awareness was aroused amongst governments, the media, social services and the public that it was the task of everyone to prevent such tragedies by any means necessary in the future. This awareness was and still is strengthened by the belief that 'where previous generations would have attributed tragedies and failures to fate or God' (Munro, 2004, p. 1077), we as a society are now able to control our own environment (Broadhurst, Hall, Wastell, White, & Pithouse, 2010; Munro, 2004; Parton, 2008). As a result, governments, social services and the public are now bound up with identifying, assessing and above all reducing the level of risk for children in order to protect them from any harm and abuse (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Falconer et al., 2009; Munro, 2004; Parton, 1998; Scourfield & Welsh, 2003).

According to Parton, 'this emphasis on risk is [also] indicative of a move towards a logic in which the possibility of incurring misfortune or loss in the future is neither to be left to fate, nor to be managed by the providential state' (Parton, 2008, p. 19). This explains why governments are so keen to invest in practices of risk reduction, such as EISs. First, they seem to be convinced that the formalisation of practice through – in this case – systems of risk management will make potentially dangerous situations visible. This in turn will encourage social services and practitioners to intervene more quickly than before and ultimately protect children from abuse, mistreatment and confrontation with violence (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Falconer et al., 2009; Munro, 2004; Parton, 1998). Secondly, EISs are often accompanied by fixed templates and standardised preordained text boxes and responses, which will – according to their designers and advocates – limit the possibility of error (Broadhurst et al., 2010). This derives from the idea that it is not appropriate to

leave a decision about possible risk and harm to 'subjective' professionals alone as the consequences of getting that decision wrong are considerable and potentially fatal for the child concerned (Parton, 2008). EISs, including risk assessment tools and their fixed templates, solve this issue as they give the impression of calculability and objectivity (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Parton, 2008).

The above-mentioned developments of risk reduction and managerialism illustrate how contemporary societal discourses influence and even steer the implementation of EISs in social work and social work practice. First, governments count on data derived from EISs to enable quick intervention when children are 'flagged' or considered at risk. And secondly, governments also use the gathered data to measure social performance, increase the efficiency of social services and hold them accountable for their actions and the public funding they receive. It therefore comes as no surprise that data gathered by EISs are an important source and knowledge base for policy decisions and social services, as well as for frontline practice (Aronson & Smith, 2010; Hall et al., 2010; Jones, 2001; Parton, 2000).

Towards a responsive social work practice

A number of scholars (Carrilio, 2005; Carrilio, 2008; De Meersman, 2010; Garrett, 2005; Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008; Van Yperen, 2013) have conceded that EISs have several potentially beneficial uses for frontline practice as they 'can capture the intensity, duration, location, frequency, and other details of "what happened"' (Carrilio, 2005, p. 45). These authors claim that the data derived from EISs are also an important source of knowledge and a knowledge base for further developing and improving social work practice (Carrilio, 2005; 2008, 2008; De Meersman, 2010; Garrett, 2005; Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008; Van Yperen, 2013). In that vein, it has even been argued that EISs are capable of increasing the quality of social work as they assist practitioners and social services in being responsive to the needs of children and their families (De Meersman, 2010; Harlow & Webb, 2003; Hill & Shaw, 2011; Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008; Van Yperen, 1996, 2013).

A conversational practice

In this context, reference is made firstly to how EISs may help 'to obtain rich material and understanding of participants' [clients'] experience' (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008, p. 1485). It has accordingly been argued that EISs 'can provide a

medium for communication with children that they may find less inhibiting than face-to-face discussion with adults' (Sapey, 1997, p. 812). According to several scholars, EISs such as decision-making, assessment and case recording tools have the capacity and potential to assist clients in telling their story, which, in turn, can lead to a better understanding of a client's situation (Carrilio, 2005; Sapey, 1997; Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008).

This narrative character is considered to be an important factor in improving the quality of social work and developing a responsive social work practice. In the end, it is through this story and dialogue that 'social work has attempted [and still attempts] to present a picture of their clients' life story' (Parton, 2009, p. 719). This dialogue can therefore be seen as 'the medium through which the practitioner can engage with and intervene in the complexity of an individual's internal and external worlds' (Wilson, Ruch, Lymbery, & Cooper, 2008, p. 7). It is, in other words, through this conversational practice between the client and the practitioner that the social worker is able to tune in to the concrete 'life story or a biography of [that particular client] with a certain sense of internal connection between the past, present and the future' (Aas, 2004, p. 386) in which a client's problems and concerns occur and are being mutually discussed (Oostrik, 2010; Parton & O'Bryne, 2000; Parton, 2009).

A transparent practice

Secondly, Tregeagle and Darcy also argue that an ICT-driven system such as EISs 'has a powerful capacity to deliver information and order communication, which is well appreciated in the wider world' (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008, p. 1486). By this, they appear to refer to what several scholars have already indicated, namely that EISs are capable of making everything visible at every level that is considered to be important (Gillingham & Graham, 2015; Van Yperen, 1996, 2013). According to Gillingham and Graham (2015), social work has always been engaged in creating transparency with regard to the client, the practitioner, social services and the public, as the creation of a transparent social work practice is seen as a central characteristic of responsive social work (Gillingham & Graham, 2015; Hill & Shaw, 2011; Munro, 2004; Pollack, 2009).

However, in a responsive social work practice transparency not only refers to showing the outside world what is happening in that practice with that particular client. On the contrary, a responsive social work practice also entails a more general orientation towards transparency, one in which the complexity

of a client's life world is made visible, negotiable and open for discussion (McBeath & Webb, 2002; Van Nijnatten, 2004). As a result, social work's knowledge base is constantly being renegotiated in relation to the complexity of every client's life world as this complexity is made transparent and not perceived as a static or predefined space (Evans & Hardy, 2010; Moss & Dahlberg, 2005). According to De Meersman (2010), EISs are perfectly suited to doing this, as they are able to capture the 'whole image'. He and other scholars (e.g. Carrilio, 2005) argue that the structure of an EIS encourages practitioners to pay explicit attention to all life domains that are considered important to grasping the complexity of a client's life world and to make this complexity visible.

Or a technical social work practice?

Despite this positive rhetoric and the belief that EISs can contribute to a responsive social work practice, recent research has also raised some major concerns in bringing EISs into day-to-day social work practice.

New Public Management

Firstly, several scholars point out that the current emphasis on EISs and its capabilities is heavily influenced by recent developments in New Public Management (NPM) and the accompanying rhetoric of managerialism, which has also reached social work (Aronson & Smith, 2009, 2010; Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Clarke & Newman, 1997; Leung, 2006; Tsui & Cheung, 2004). As mentioned earlier on, this managerial rhetoric emphasises increasing the efficiency of social services in order to save money (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008), making these services, as well as the social work interventions of practitioners, more auditable (Falconer et al., 2009; Gillingham & Graham, 2016; Munro, 2004) and measuring the results of social work interventions by introducing performance measurement (Aronson & Smith, 2010; Banks, 2013; Taylor, 2009; Van Yperen, 1996). It therefore comes as no surprise that principles such as manageability and controllability are central to this development. The major concern, however, is that such principles also tend to impede development towards responsive social work as they are deskilling social work practice (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Evans & Harris, 2004).

Lego bricks

Secondly, other research draws attention to the mechanism of pre-structuring (De Vos and Kabergs, 2005). Here, the concerns and problems of clients and

their families are reduced, as they need to fit into the preordained and fixed templates that are typical of EISs (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; White et al., 2009). The client's life world is split into several pieces and this risks breaking up a holistic view of the client's life story (Aas, 2004; De Vos & Kabergs, 2005; Pithouse et al., 2012). The outcome of such a splitting process is that the complexity of the client's situation is left out of account (Bradt et al., 2011; Gillingham, 2015; Lorenz, 2007; Parton, 2006). This results in social work being based mainly on the logic of the database (Parton, 2006). Whereas previously social work was primarily an oral and written set of practices which relied on the construction of narratives, increasingly this seems to be less the case (Parton, 2009, p. 718). This is disturbing, not only because the information gathered by these databases is genuinely different from that gathered by narratives (Lash, 2002; Manovich, 2001), but especially because recognising the complexity and the narrative character of the client's situation is precisely one of the important aspects of responsive social work (McBeath, Jolles, Chuang, Bunger, & Collins-Camargo, 2014; Van Nijnatten, 2004).

Decontextualisation

Next to this process of pre-structuring, a third process occurs, namely that of decontextualisation (Hall et al., 2010). It appears that under the influence of EISs, social work tends to leave out important information on clients' social and relational contexts (Hall et al., 2010). According to these authors, this process – in parallel with the process of pre-structuring – has been stimulated by the growing importance of fixed templates that are aimed at assisting practitioners to fill in client data (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; White et al., 2009). Hall et al. (2010) argue that the result is that children are being disaggregated from their family because the 'family file' is being replaced by a 'child-centred file'. This is troubling as a central task of social work lies in being responsive to the broader social context in which a client's problems occur instead of focusing on their individual characteristics (Specht & Courtney, 1994).

The electronic eye

Fourthly, research by several scholars points out that EISs serve as tools not merely for practice but also for social control (e.g. Garrett, 2005; Gillingham, 2011; Keymolen & Broeders, 2013; Parton, 2008). This is why, according to Parton (2008, p. 183), we are 'witnessing the emergence of the preventive surveillance state'. Several authors argue that data gathered by EISs is genuinely used by governmental agencies to intervene earlier in children's lives and especially to target potentially troublesome children such as the poor and

the socially and economically marginalised (Garrett, 2004; Keymolen & Broeders, 2013). According to Keymolen and Broeders (2013, p. 57), 'functions of surveillance and control are tagged on in the development' of EISs, raising some serious concerns about the adverse impact of EISs on the civil liberties of children and families as issues of privacy arise (Garrett, 2005; Keymolen & Broeders, 2013; Munro, 2005). The result is that clients have major reservations about contacting social services to request help (Keymolen & Broeders, 2013).

Screen-level bureaucrat

Lastly, some scholars have pointed out that the street-level bureaucrat (Lipsky, 1980) is in danger of becoming a screen-level bureaucrat (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002). First, it is argued that practitioners' discretion is being curtailed due to the importance attached to EISs, as these systems now decide what information is considered relevant, rather than practitioners (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Parton, 2006; Pithouse et al., 2012; Tsui & Cheung, 2004). Second, practitioners are spending a great deal of time behind their computers, resulting in contact with a client that mostly happens through or in the presence of a computer screen (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Hill & Shaw, 2011). This, in turn, makes it difficult for practitioners to engage meaningfully with clients (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Pithouse et al., 2012; White et al., 2010), since the relationship between practitioners and clients is stripped of its social significance (Parton, 2006). In other words, the amount of technicality increases (Parton 2009), whereas the capacity for professional judgement and uncertainty decreases (White et al. 2010). This tends to stimulate the development of a technical social work practice while impeding the development of responsive social work.

Research agenda

These major concerns strengthen the argument that EISs might actually reduce social work to a more technical practice. Here, the central focus is on manageability and predictability, which might impede rather than enhance a development towards a responsive social work practice (Aas, 2004; Aronson & Smith, 2010; Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Broadhurst et al., 2010; Broadhurst & Mason, 2012; Hall et al., 2010; Lecluijze, 2015; Manovich, 2001; Parton, 2006; Tsui & Cheung, 2004; White et al., 2009).

This is, however, not necessarily the case. A number of authors have demonstrated how social services as well as frontline staff use their discretion to resist the possible reduction of their daily work to a mere technical matter (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; De Witte, Declercq, & Hermans, 2015; Evans & Harris, 2004; Evans, 2011, 2015; Huuskonen & Vakkari, 2013). In that vein, several authors have even argued that developments such as EISs also 'open up new areas in which discretion can operate' (Hill & Shaw, 2011, p. 86). Some recent research at the frontline level exemplifies this, by showing, for instance, that practitioners retain paper files (De Witte et al., 2015; White et al., 2009), record in a decision-making tool after a decision has already been made (Gillingham, 2009) or enter an 'x' in obligatory fields (De Witte et al., 2015) when they believe that EISs go against their own commitments towards clients and are in danger of reducing social work to a technical practice.

Clearly, contemporary research has already provided us with many answers concerning the strategies practitioners and social services develop to bend, shape or even ignore governmental procedures concerning the use of EISs. Throughout this dissertation, we will discuss these and their meaning for social work. Of specific interest, however, are not only these strategies, but also the more general idea that social work is not self-evidently determined by EISs or by the identified risks they bring for practice. It is clear that practitioners as well as social services position themselves in various ways towards this 'electronic turn' (Bradt et al., 2011). In that vein, Garrett has suggested that 'a research agenda should be put in place to map the changes which are occurring and to examine what is happening "on the ground" to social work' (Garrett, 2005, p. 542).

Based on our overview of the current social developments that are steering the accelerated pace towards implementing EISs in social work, the possible positive and negative implications of EISs, as well as the tensions that occur between responsive and technical social work and the way social work practice seems to handle these tensions, this research agenda should focus on the relationship between EISs and the development of responsive social work.

We consider this research agenda to be threefold in needing to capture the domains of policy, management and practice, as important knowledge gaps occur in all three domains. Since this deserves more explanation, we will discuss these three domains extensively, explain why they are of great importance for

researching the development of a responsive social work practice in the context of EISs and identify which knowledge gaps occur in each domain.

Policy-oriented research agenda

At the start of this introduction, we touched upon the current rhetoric of managerialism and risk management and described how these two societal developments or forces are steering the current preoccupation with EISs. One might therefore argue that it is now clear why governments are so keen to invest in EISs. This is, however, not entirely the case because it remains empirically unclear what the generic governmental rationales are for the broad governmental adoption of EISs in social work practice (Garret, 2005). In order to grasp this broad governmental movement and the complexity of the current debates concerning EISs, we need a thorough identification of the governmental rationales that lie at the basis of the developments towards EISs. Given the many debates worldwide about the usefulness of such systems, it is remarkable that the governmental rationales have not been empirically identified. We will therefore tackle this knowledge gap in chapter two.

Although the policy rationales concerning EISs are empirically unknown, governments are often perceived as monolithic, coherent and homogeneous entities (Thoenig, 2011), a bogeyman that installs EISs purely for self-interested purposes. As a result, social work and policy makers are often considered to be opponents (Lecluijze, 2015), although we actually have no account of the reasons why policy makers generally advocate EISs and urge social services and practitioners to use them in their social work practice. This knowledge gap often results in mutual ignorance and misunderstanding, while a thorough debate about EISs calls for an open dialogue. However, such a dialogue is not possible if the motives, views and rationales amongst policy makers themselves are not identified. These might provide important in-depth explanations of the governmental rationales for developing EISs and the reasons why it is claimed that these systems will contribute to the development of responsive social work. We therefore argue that is not only important to identify empirically the rationales for the broader governmental movement towards EISs, but also to flesh out the rationales and motives of policy makers themselves, as these may provide insight into the multifaceted processes and reasoning within policy making itself. We address this question in chapter three.

Organisation-oriented research agenda

In outlining the managerial tendency that is steering the development of EISs in social work practice, we pointed out that the mounting claim of accountability is considered to be one of the important rationales for installing EISs. It seems that through these systems, governments attempt to increase accountability by using data that derives from EISs to hold both practitioners and social services accountable for their actions. These data are considered to be rational and objective as the uniform structure of many of these systems limits the room for error (Baines, 2010; Burton & van den Broek, 2009). At the same time, it has been argued that the deployment of EISs will improve the quality of social work (Hupe & Hill, 2007) and in turn stimulate the development of a responsive social work practice.

In this context, managers are commonly regarded as advocates and important actors in successfully implementing the use of EISs in their social service and in creating an environment in which practitioners also embrace the relevance of EISs to demonstrate their organisational and professional accountability (Carrilio, 2008; Pallot, 1999). However, recent research (Evans, 2011; Shanks, Lundström, & Wiklund, 2015) has pointed out that not only practitioners use their discretion to work around EISs when they feel that they reduce their practice to a technical level, but also that managers tend to do the same. There is, however, a lack of knowledge about these managers' views, rationales and motives in implementing EISs in their organisations in general, and more particularly in using EISs to demonstrate accountability. This is itself an interesting field of research as these managers are considered important actors within their organisations for implementing EISs and for creating an environment where the use of EISs is valued as important (Pallot, 1999). In chapter four we will therefore revisit empirically the current state of knowledge about the role of managers in using EISs in social services in general and in relation to the creation of accountability in particular.

Practice-oriented research agenda

As mentioned, several scholars have argued that EISs contribute to the development of a responsive social work practice. We have, in that regard, identified that responsive social work includes a conversational practice and a transparent practice (De Meersman, 2010; Harlow & Webb, 2003; Hill & Shaw, 2011; Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008; Van Yperen, 1996, 2013). With regard to the dimension of narrative practice, recent research (Aas, 2004; Lash, 2002; Manovich, 2001) has already shown that using EISs to create a narrative

practice is not necessarily a good thing. However, none of this research led to any conclusions regarding the idea of creating a transparent practice through EISs. It may therefore also be worth taking a closer look at this dimension as interesting developments may occur. The question remains whether and how EISs can make the actions of professionals 'on the ground' visible and thus contribute to the development of a responsive social work practice. We will tackle this question in chapter five.

At the same time – and we have already mentioned this several times above – there is general agreement that the strategies practitioners use to bend, shape or ignore governmental procedures and regulations in using EISs self-evidently contribute to a responsive social work practice (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Evans, 2010; Evans, 2011, 2013; Evans & Hardy, 2010). Interestingly though, there is no or little empirical evidence to support this statement. Starting from this observation, we argue that it would be helpful to explore empirically how the strategies used by social practitioners relate to the broader development of responsive social work in a context of EISs and what their meaning is for this development. We will discuss this current knowledge gap in chapter six.

Overview of the research gaps

The above overview has depicted in some detail the current context in which the development towards EISs in social work is situated. It has also reviewed contemporary research on EISs, their potentials and limitations for contributing to the development of responsive social work, and the way social work practitioners and social services handle the tension that arises while using EISs. This overview has highlighted some sizeable lacunae in our current knowledge of the use of EISs in social work and, more particularly, of the use of EISs to develop a responsive social work practice. These lacunae, already highlighted above, can be summarised as follows:

- The current policy rationales and discourses concerning the implementing of EISs in social work remain rather abstract and oriented towards broader societal developments, such as the pre-occupation with risk and the omnipresence of a managerial tendency. Hence, it is remarkable that there is little to no empirical insight into the policy rationales that are steering what has become a widespread development that is being implemented with greater pace than ever before.

- The current debate concerning EISs is often framed as a debate between governments, which advocate the use of EISs, and social work practice and practitioners, who refuse to use EISs properly by, for instance, bending governmental procedures and regulations. However, this framing asserts a large gap between the two sides despite there being already a substantial knowledge gap in the debate. To date, we have no account of the motives, views and rationales of policy makers themselves, in particular of those that provide the basis for implementing and advocating EISs in social work practice.

- Despite the mounting claim of accountability and the premise that the adoption of EISs will assist practitioners and social services, as well as governments, in demonstrating it, little or no research has been undertaken on the role of managers in this debate. The contemporary literature often ignores their perspective as they are perceived to be advocates of EISs. Recent research, however, sheds light on a more nuanced viewpoint and considers these managers to be pivotal for the implementation of EISs in their organisation in general, and the use of EISs for accountability in particular.

- Although creating transparency is considered to be a pivotal element of responsive social work and EISs are being installed to achieve this goal, there is little knowledge of how EISs create or impede transparency in social work practice. Many actors, such as the public, governments, social services and also practitioners, seem to take this idea for granted. Empirical research 'on the ground' is necessary to shed light on the relationship between and the meaning of EISs and transparency, especially as transparency is an important feature of responsive social work.

- There is substantial empirical evidence on how practitioners and especially frontline workers use their discretion while handling EISs. This literature seems to suggest that this is a good thing and that the strategies that are being developed in handling EISs, such as those mentioned above, resonate with a responsive social work practice. This interpretation is taken for granted and widely accepted, but there is no empirical evidence focusing on the meaning of such strategies for the development of a responsive social work practice.

Research outline

Problem statement

We have now identified several lacunae in the current knowledge of EISs and especially of EISs in relation to a responsive social work practice. In doing so, we have noted that policy rationales for implementing EISs in social work practices are being subordinated to broad societal developments. Additionally, we have illustrated how social work perceives governments as a bogeyman (Thoenig, 2011) without having any notion of the policy rationales, views, motives and discourses of policy makers. This group has largely been left out of the debate so far, even though they might provide us with in-depth explanations of the broad governmental movement towards EISs. Furthermore, we have stated that the current debate is in need of a stronger empirical knowledge base as some assumptions are being taken for granted without supporting evidence. We referred to the widespread idea that EISs will provide an answer to the mounting claim of accountability and the role of managers in achieving this. Reiterating a point we made earlier, we would like to point out that these managers are – just like policy makers – a group that has been largely left out of the debate so far or have been described mainly as advocates of EISs, while at the same time they are regarded as pivotal actors within their organisations (Pallot, 1999). Consequently, the failure to recognise their role and its importance limits our current understanding of how managers handle the current movement towards EISs in general and in relation to accountability in particular, both within their organisations and amongst their practitioners.

At the same, the idea that EISs will create a transparent social work practice where actions on the ground are made visible through the use of EISs and the data they generate is also taken for granted, despite the lack of empirical knowledge. The problem here is that the development of EISs is still ongoing and even increasing in some countries, while their contribution towards creating transparency has not been investigated. As this creation of transparency is an important contributor towards a responsive social work practice, tackling this limitation could provide us with clear answers about the meaning of EISs for the more general development of a responsive social work practice.

Also taken for granted is the proposition that the so-called street-level strategies social practitioners devise when using EISs will lead to a responsive social work

practice as they are being created to counter the possible downgrade of social practice to a merely technical exercise. Though such a conception seems plausible at first sight, it is troubling that the meaning of these strategies for the development of responsive social work has not yet been fleshed out, as they are being put in practice on a daily basis.

Research questions

Taking into account the outlined lacunae of the current research, this dissertation seeks to shed light on the governmental, organisational and practice-oriented development of responsive social work in the context of the widespread adoption of EISs. More concretely, we set out the following research questions:

1) What are the governmental rationales for installing EISs and how do these rationales relate to the development of responsive social work?

2) What are the motives, views and discourses of policy makers that form the basis for the implementation of EISs and what is their meaning for the development of responsive social work?

3) How do managers handle the governmental imperative towards the adoption of EISs in their organisations?

4) What are the views and discourses of managers concerning the use of EISs to demonstrate accountability?

5) How do social practitioners handle the governmental imperative towards the adoption of EISs in their social work practice?

6) What are the views and discourses of social practitioners concerning the creation of transparency in their social work practice through the use of EISs?

7) What is the meaning of the strategies used by social practitioners in evading, shaping or bending governmental procedures for the development of responsive social work?

Research aim

The overall aim of the study is to contribute to and increase the knowledge of and knowledge base for a responsive social work practice in the context of EISs. In pursuing this objective, the study firstly aims to contribute to the empirical

base of the broad governmental movement towards adopting EISs and the rationales steering this development. Secondly, this study also aims to contribute to the current debates about demonstrating accountability and creating transparency through EISs. In this context, the study aims to include the perspectives of both managers and social practitioners, contributing in respect of the former to the knowledge base about managers and their role in social services and in respect of the latter to the current knowledge about their role in using EISs. In doing so, we also aim to grasp the complexity of the street-level strategies used by practitioners and to contribute to the current empirical evidence about the meaning of these strategies for social work, social work practice and responsive social work. The overall aim also encapsulates the wish to articulate some implications and recommendations for future policy and practice concerning responsive social work on the one hand and EISs in social work on the other.

Research context

Child Welfare and Protection in Flanders

The research aim and the research questions set out above will be addressed in the context of Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. As promoting the wellbeing of children is a constant social and political challenge within contemporary society, governments struggle with the question how they can guarantee it and protect children from harm such as abuse, neglect or other dangers that may inhibit their development. The answer to that question is never straightforward and often depends on the state's perspective concerning its own responsibility for the upbringing and education of its young citizens. While some states choose a minimalist interpretation of this responsibility (providing basic social safety nets and protecting children from harm), others prefer a maximalist interpretation (protect children from risk and unequal life outcomes). Gilbert, Parton and Skivenes (2011) point out that 'the way in which this responsibility is constructed, is related to how the child welfare system defines responsibility between the private and the public spheres, and to cultural views on children and the family' (Gilbert et al., 2011, p. 6). In other words: today's view on Child Welfare and Protection (CWP) is influenced by the socio-cultural and political context in which it is embedded (Cousée, Bradt, Roose and De Bie, 2010).

This is precisely the reason why we find it of great importance to provide the reader with some detailed insights into our research context in Flanders.

However, before dealing with the specifics of the Flemish CWP landscape, we will very briefly sketch the current state structure. While going here in detail is clearly beyond the scope of this dissertation, certain features are important to bear in mind when we explain some of the theoretical and methodological choices we have made. Belgium is a federal state with communities and regions with their own cabinet, parliament and administration. Flanders is one of those regions and the most northern federated region of Belgium, with approximately 6.5 million inhabitants, including 1.3 million minors (0 to 18 years old) (Waeyaert, 2016).

In order to fully capture the complexity of this structure in relation to the topic of CWP, there are two important premises that we need to bear in mind. The first is the distinction between extrajudicial or voluntary youth care and judicial or mandatory youth care. A first difference between these two is situated at the legal level, namely that voluntary CWP is under the jurisdiction of the regions such as Flanders and Wallonia, while judicial CWP is under the jurisdiction of the federal state. A second difference is situated at the level of enforcement. In theory, the aim is to provide as much voluntary youth care as possible. However, much depends on the consent of the child and his/her parents about the necessity for care and the offered care proposal. If they agree and cooperate, voluntary youth care can continue and there is no need for mandatory assistance. However, in some cases it can happen that children and/or their parents disagree with the necessity for care or that the concerns about the life situation of the child are so serious that there is a need for judicial intervention. This is, for instance, the case when parents abuse their child but refuse to admit this or when a minor severely assaults other persons. In those cases – when cooperation is no longer possible or when there is an alarming situation – the clients file will be transferred to the Office of the Public Juvenile Prosecutor, who can engage a juvenile judge (Desair & Adriaenssens, 2011). This judge is linked to the juvenile court, which is a special court for minors, as they do not appear before the same court as adults. Here, a juvenile judge will hear all the actors involved and decide whether there is an urgent need for care and which care seems appropriate. The juvenile judge can direct a wide variety of measures, depending on the client's situation. These measures may be the same as those undertaken in the voluntary CWP regime, the main difference being that decisions made by the juvenile judge cannot be contested and have to be enforced (Bouverne-De Bie & Roose, 2009; Vanhee, 2014).

The second premise is that in 2006, an administrative reform called 'Better Governmental Policy ('Beter Bestuurlijk Beleid') was decreed by the Flemish

Government, restructuring it into thirteen homogeneous policy domains. Each policy domain is 'a collection of policy issues that were shaped into a coherent whole with an associated department and multiple agencies. In addition, there is no longer a hierarchical relationship between the department and the agencies – which is rather unique in Europe – implying that departments cannot steer or give any instruction to agencies' (Verhoest, Voets, & Molenveld, 2013, p. 3). One of the thirteen policy domains is Welfare, Public Health and Family, coordinated by the Minister of Welfare, Public Health and Family and directed by the ministerial cabinet, the administration and several agencies. All of these agencies, such as the Agency for Child and Family, the Agency for Care and Health, the Agency for the Disabled and the Youth Welfare Agency, bear responsibility for the creation, support and implementation of policy concerning one specific part of the policy domain of Welfare, Public Health and Family. With regard to the CWP system, the Youth Welfare Agency is the most important agency, accompanied by the Agency for Child and Family and the Agency for the Disabled.

Integrated Child Welfare and Protection as 'pièce de résistance'

Knowing all this, the main reason we choose Flanders as our research domain is because not only is it one of the regions responsible for the organisation of CWP, but it is also a compelling case in relation to our central research topic. As it happens, Flanders is currently in the aftermath of a recent reform in which the use of EISs gained greater importance. However, in order to capture fully the complexity and the context in which the research took place, we need to cast back to the 1990s. At that time, the current status of youth delinquency and youth-related problems in Flanders was perceived as alarming. The pressure on CWP services kept growing and the issues minors were struggling with were considered more severe than ever before. As a result of this disturbing situation, the Flemish Parliament inaugurated a Parliamentary Ad Hoc Commission on Special Youth Care in 1998. The commission initiated a thorough and extensive debate about the structure, strengths, rationales and concerns of the CWP system as it then existed. It exposed the severe fragmentation of child and family services, which not only resulted in striking gaps and overlaps in the provision of services but also led to ineffectiveness and inefficiency in the CWP system (Merckx-Van Goey, 1999; Roets, Roose, Schiettecat, & Vandenbroeck, 2016). At the same time, it uncovered a lack of cooperation between the several CWP services in the field, with a lack of transparency and coordination as a consequence (Bouverne-De Bie & Roose, 2009). This in turn created blind spots and overlaps in the provision of services

that led to unnecessary referrals and ultimately a lack of appropriate care (Bouverne-De Bie & Roose, 2009).

In 2004, two Acts of Parliament were enacted to meet the recommendations of the Parliamentary Ad Hoc Commission in 1998 (Vanhee, 2014). The first Act established Integrated Child Welfare and Protection, which is still the current legal foundation for a Flemish CWP system that is regarded as user-driven instead of service-driven and in which the client's needs, rather than the interests and ideas of social services, are the central focus. The Act initiated an inter-sectoral reorganisation of all welfare services for children and young people up to 18 years of age. These services, both non-residential and residential, were divided into a variety of care sectors such as mental health care, child and family support, and care for disabled people (Flemish Government, 2004a). This reorganisation took place with the aim of reducing the number of referrals and decreasing the pressure on CWP organisations (Merckx-Van Goey, 1999). The second Act concerned the rights of children within Integrated Youth Care (Vanhee, 2014). This Act was a clear illustration of the Flemish governments' awareness of children's rights, inspired by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989. It offers profound guarantees in terms of legal protection for children who are admitted to the Flemish CWP system, such as the right to appropriate care, participation, information, privacy, assistance, a decent life, pocket money, and respect for the context and the family, as well as the right to have access into his/her own file (Flemish Government, 2004b).

However, despite the efforts made by the Flemish Government to tackle some of the problems described by the Parliamentary Ad Hoc Commission, the following years were characterised by a constantly growing need for care. Between 2000 and 2012, the number of children growing up in vulnerable situations and asking for help increased by as much as 70 per cent, while the number of urgent care requests for children with a disability tripled during the period 2003 - 2010 (Vanhee, 2014). Not surprisingly, this resulted in a lack of capacity and long waiting lists for children in need of support (Bouverne-De Bie, De Vos, & Roose, 2014; Roets, Dean, & De Bie, 2014; Vanhee, 2014). At the same time, the Flemish CWP landscape was characterised by a severe fragmentation of child services and striking gaps and overlaps in the provision of services, which led to an ineffective and inefficient use of resources. This was further reinforced by the clear distinction between CWP and other social services, such as parenting support (Roets et al., 2014; Vanhee, 2014). In this process, the number of referrals went through the roof and children were sent

from pillar to post, arriving in no man's land and ultimately not receiving the appropriate care.

This troubling situation led to a new Act of Parliament on Integrated CWP, approved in 2014, which fine-tuned the 2004 Act. This Act is of great importance for our research and that is the reason why we will elaborate on the specifics of this recent reform. In general, the reform significantly reconstructed the CWP system in Flanders by creating several 'buildings blocks', which together form one single organisational and conceptual framework, referred to as Integrated CWP (Flemish Government, 2014; Vanhee, 2014; Verhoest, Voets, & Molenveld, 2014).

The first building block modularised the CWP supply across all providers into standardised packages of care. This is why all organisations are obliged to define their own services so it is clear for everyone involved what services they offer. These services can then be linked to one another and services from different organisations can be combined. These standardised packages of care should create a proper care chain and case trajectory. By doing so, the Flemish government aims to regain control over the fragmented CWP services and reduce the number of referrals and gaps in the provision of services (Bouverne-De Bie & Roose, 2009; Flemish Government, 2014; Vanhee, 2014; Verhoest et al., 2013, 2014).

The second building block refers to the creation of regional Networks for Emergency Care, also referred to as Crisis Networks. By installing these networks, the Flemish government aims to respond rapidly when emergency situations occur. This is, for instance, the case when the police are notified that a child is being abused and has to be removed out of the home immediately. In those cases, it is the task of the crisis network to keep track of all the available places in CWP organisations throughout the region and to smooth and optimise access to them so that the child can be directed immediately to those most closely matching his/her needs at that specific time (Flemish Government, 2014; Verhoest et al., 2013, 2014).

The third building block refers to the important distinction that is made between directly and non-directly accessible CWP. While the former is directly accessible for young people and their parents, the latter is only accessible through an 'entrance ticket', which can be obtained in the so-called Intersectoral Gateway (Van Tomme, Verhoest & Voets, 2011). Directly accessible care is mainly non-residential or short-term care, such as mental

health care, while non-directly accessible care mainly refers to long-term non-residential or residential care, such as out-of-home placements, including specialised types of care such as fostering. These forms of care are more intrusive and expensive and that is precisely the reason why they can only be accessed by a referral from a directly accessible organisation to the Intersectoral Gateway.

This Intersectoral Gateway – and this is the fourth but also most important building block – can be regarded as a public service and is part of the Youth Welfare Agency of the Flemish Government (Van Tomme et al., 2011) . In each province, there is one Intersectoral Gateway, complemented by one gateway in Brussels. As previously outlined, the Gateway organises access to the indirectly accessible CWP services for more severe cases by deciding who is eligible for which kind of indirectly accessible CWP service. The Intersectoral Gateway itself is comprised of two teams of social workers: the Needs Assessment Team (NAT) and the Youth Care Planning Team (YCPT). When a social worker located in directly accessible care, together with the child, believes that he/she is in need of specialised care, this social worker is obliged to submit an electronic standardised form, called the Assistance Document (A-DOC). The A-DOC can be regarded as an application form and can only be submitted through an EIS named INSISTO (Information System for the Intersectoral Gateway). The INSISTO tool is an electronic environment in which social workers can open an A-DOC after login. The A-DOC itself consists of five components, including (i) identification of the client and his/her family, where personal information can be written down; (ii) information about the needs of the child, the current living situation, care that has previously been offered and the strengths and weaknesses of the child and his/her family; (iii) diagnostic information about possible mental and physical disabilities, including test results; (iv) an extra information box where social workers can include discussions they have had about the client with their own team members; and lastly (v) a component where all actors need to formulate a proposal for appropriate care. In each component, several actors, such as the child, parents and other support persons, as well as the social worker, can give their own opinion, regardless of the opinion of others. Once the A-DOC has been completed, it is sent to the regional NAT. It will discuss and assess the content of the A-DOC and decide whether the requested help is necessary and appropriate. When the NAT believes important information is missing, it will contact the social worker who submitted the A-DOC. This implies that there is no direct communication between the NAT and the child and the family, although the social worker who submitted the A-DOC can exceptionally

request a meeting between the child and the NAT. Once it has assessed the A-DOC, the child receives a Needs Assessment Report within thirty business days that indicates what kind of services are considered to be most suitable. Afterwards, the Youth Care Planning Team figures out which CWP services are actually available to provide the care the child is eligible for and refers the child to a specific care provider. Ultimately, the child receives a youth care proposal, care from that specific care provider. If the Youth Care Planning Team proposes several care providers, the child has the opportunity to choose from the proposed organisations. Once the child has chosen, the care provider must give their approval, after which the child is placed on the waiting list and submitted as soon as a place frees up (Flemish Government, 2014; Vanhee, 2014).

Methodological framework

When defining the research problem, fleshing out the research questions, going into the field to undertake the research and analysing all the raw data collected during the process, research always starts from a methodological framework. This is no different in this dissertation and in the preceding research. In what follows, we will therefore set out that framework. In this process, characteristics of the setting, the methods, the ethics and the analysis will be discussed comprehensively.

A qualitative stance

Bearing in mind the research questions, it may come as no surprise that the research we performed is qualitative research. In the end, we were aiming to capture the perspectives of a diversity of key actors, including policy makers, managers and social practitioners. This is typical for qualitative research as 'qualitative researchers […] can continually be found asking questions of the people they are learning from to discover what they are experiencing, how they interpret their experiences, and how they themselves structure the social world in which they live' (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 7). As a result of this approach, we also used qualitative methods of data collection and data analysis. These methods and approaches will now be discussed for each study individually.

A context review of the literature

In their book on qualitative research, Van Hove and Claes (2011, p. 38) point out that 'an early and essential step in doing a study is to review the accumulated knowledge on your research question' as 'it is wise to find out

what others have already learned about an issue before you address it on your own' (Van Hove & Claes, 2011). In order to do our homework and to gain a better and detailed understanding of the movement towards EISs in social work, the research that has already been done and the conclusions that are drawn from that research, we conducted a context review of the academic literature (Van Hove & Claes, 2011). This implies that the literature review did not aim to generate a meta analysis of the existing literature, but to use the existing literature to gain more insight in our central research topic. In conducting this search, we initially focused on more general terminology such as 'decision-making tools', 'responsive', 'electronic information technology', 'information tools' and 'registration'. In the process, new areas of interest quickly came to the fore and our attention was drawn to topics such as 'accountability', 'transparency', 'discretion' and 'managerialism' as these were recurring themes. Here, there was no distinction made between specific literature that was critical or advocating of the on-going development. On the contrary, we seized the opportunity to read as much literature as possible as this allowed us to situate our study within a broader framework of existing literature. This in turn also stimulated us to develop our specific line of thought as outlined above.

The primary sources for this context review were academic scholarly journals that were accessible through the Web of Science, an online research platform for academic research and scientific information on a diversity of topics. Examining the reference lists from these articles contributed to the underpinnings of this study by enriching and widening our scope. As a result, our review of literature was not limited to the central topic of EISs, but also involved a more general orientation towards broader social work literature.

Traditionally, a context review appears at the beginning of a research project or study (Van Hove & Claes, 2011). However, during the research we attended several international conferences where we discussed our work with co-researchers. They, in turn, provided us with new information and research articles that enriched our view. As a result, this context review of literature was not only carried out at the beginning but continued throughout the period of research. This also enabled us to stay in touch with up-to-date material and literature.

Study 1 – Browsing through policy documents

To gain a better understanding of the governmental rationales for installing EISs in social work in general and CWP in particular, we focused on existing policy documents from the Flemish Government, as the field of CWP Flanders is the context in which our research found place. In what follows, we will outline how we selected the policy documents and analysed them.

Selection of the policy documents

Generally, policy documents cannot be found in traditional libraries. Often, specialised lists of publications and indexes are needed to gain an overview of the existing policy documents (Van Hove & Claes, 2011). In Flanders, though, policy documents are made available online on the website of the Flemish Government. Hence, this database was used to provide an overview of the policy documents as well as to download them. The policy documents that are used in this study are policy documents of the Flemish Government from 1999 to 2014 concerning the field of CWP and the subject of EISs as the road to the Integrated Youth Care started in 1999. One of the difficulties here was that many of the policy documents' titles were rather meaningless and did often not fully capture their contents. We therefore read many of the documents that were possibly related to our field of research. After this first reading, we were able to decide whether the document contained information about our central topic and whether it was appropriate to include the document in the analysis.

In the end, 47 policy documents were analysed thoroughly. This includes ten Acts of Parliament; seven committee reports; three written questions from Members of the Flemish Parliament addressed to the Flemish Minister of Welfare, Public Health and Family; three statements of advice from the Council of State; four verbal questions and interpolations from Members of the Flemish Parliament; 12 Policy Notes; and eight other non-categorised policy documents, such as evaluation papers.

Analysis of the policy documents

The policy documents were analysed by conducting a conventional qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This method is considered to be suitable 'to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study' (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314) and 'goes beyond merely counting words' (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). This was also the aim of this study. We did not attempt to count words in order to create quantitative categories and draw conclusions based on them. On the contrary, throughout this study

we were looking for the meaning and rationales that were reflected in the policy documents. In this process, the policy documents were read multiple times to gain a sense of the entire collection of information. Based on these readings, between May and September 2014 we coded the content of the policy documents and identified themes and patterns. This coding process was initiated with the help of Nvivo10, a qualitative data analysis application. The process identified several categories that derived from the policy documents and were not preconceived (e.g. reflection, EISs, efficiency, efficacy and gaining information) (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The main reason for this result is that little to no empirical evidence was available concerning the governmental rationales for implementing EISs, which prevented us from beginning the analysis from predetermined categories. Data that could not be categorised using these codes were marked with a new code (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Study 2 – Interviewing key policy actors

In our second study, we aimed to capture the motives, views and rationales of policy makers themselves. They are often seen as opponents of social work as they are considered responsible for the implementation of EISs in social work practice (Lecluijze, 2015). This is remarkable, though, as we have no empirical account of the reasons why they encourage social services and practitioners to use EISs. We therefore interviewed key policy actors in the field of CWP in Flanders using a semi-structured format. We will now explain how we selected the policy makers, how we conducted the semi-structured interviews and how we analysed the data that was gathered.

Selection of the participants

It is our understanding that in order to explain the selection of our participants in this second study, we need to provide the reader with some contextual information about the organisation of the political bodies in Flanders. In Flanders, each minister has his own cabinet and administration, together with a number of agencies which are responsible for the coordination of the policy field (Verhoest et al., 2014). As a result, the ministerial cabinet, the administration and the agencies that resonate under the responsibilities of the minister, are considered the key actors in the policymaking process as well as in the coordination and implementation of policy. In relation to our study and the context of the Flemish CWP system, this implies that the cabinet of the Minister of Welfare, Public Health and Family, its administration and the Child Welfare and Protection Agency, the Flemish Agency for Disabled People

and the Child and Family Agency are seen as the most relevant actors for this study.

Based on this information, we used purposive sampling to select and approach the most relevant actors (Polit & Beck, 2004). This method implies that 'the researcher assumes, based on their a-priori theoretical understanding of the topic being studied, that certain categories of individuals may have a unique, different or important perspective on the phenomenon in question and their presence in the sample should be ensured' (Robinson, 2013, p. 7). Bearing in mind the specific organisation of the Flemish political bodies, we contacted individuals within the ministerial cabinet, the administration and all agencies that were considered to be important actors in the field of CWP. In turn, these participants pointed out several other actors that they considered relevant, using the additional method of snowball sampling (Mortelmans, 2007; Van Hove & Claes, 2011).

In the end, 18 individuals were invited as research participants based on their role as a member of the cabinet, the administration or one of the three agencies. Fifteen of them—three members of the administration and 12 members of the several agencies—accepted the invitation, covering a variety of jobs such as managing director, policy adviser and staff member. Although several appointments were made during the period of data collection, no member of the cabinet participated in the research. This rather small sample size is justified as 'for this depth to be achieved, it is much more important for the research to be intensive, and thus persuasive […], rather than aim to be extensive' (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006, p. 494).

Conducting the interviews

Before the interview took place, all participants were thoroughly informed about the study and its purpose, without going into too much detail as this could have steered the interview towards a particular topic or tenet. The participants also got the opportunity to ask for clarification. Afterwards, all interviewees were invited to participate on the basis of a written informed consent. This informed consent was verbally explained and the participants also had the right to ask for clarification. All were informed of their right to withdraw during the interview process and they were also assured that the data collected would be fully anonymised and the names of third parties and institutions excised.

As already touched upon, we used semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection. One of the main advantages of a semi-structured format is that it provides ample opportunity to explore a topic in depth while also leaving sufficient room for questions that emerge from the dialogue between the interviewee and the participant (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008; Mortelmans, 2007). We considered this to be suitable as we wanted to flesh out the broad governmental rationales we identified in the policy documents, but also to gain insight into the rationales, motives and views of policy makers. To maintain this balance between a thematic structure and sufficient room for the participants to elaborate on their own perspectives, we used an interview scheme (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Gill et al., 2008; Mortelmans, 2007). During the interviews, the scheme was slightly fine-tuned as participants provided us with important topics to include in our research (Mortelmans, 2007). The interview scheme itself can be found in chapter three as part of the methodological section.

As we aimed to minimise the time policy makers had to spend in participating, the interviews took place at the workplace of the participants. They lasted for approximately one hour, varying from 45 minutes to an hour and a half. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis of the interviews

The raw data material was, firstly, uploaded into NVivo10, qualitative data analysis software which was used to analyse the interviews (Mortelmans, 2007). Once this was done, we undertook a thematic analysis of the data (Floersch, Longhofer, Kranke, & Townsend, 2010; Mortelmans, 2007; Van Hove & Claes, 2011). This was particularly interesting for our study as the significance of our research theme and the questions we aimed to flesh out were 'not determined by its frequency but by […] the consistency of themes across and within study participants' (Floersch et al., 2010, p. 408).

A critical reading and iterative coding process was initiated based on some codes/themes (e.g. conceptual ideas, ways of handling, reasons for installation and advantages, reflections) that were drafted after a first familiarisation with the data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). These codes or categories were not predefined as we allowed them to flow out of the data, using an inductive (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) or data-led approach (Van Hove & Claes, 2011) of category and coding development. This allowed us to 'identify dominant themes which underlie the content of the conversation' (Van Hove & Claes, 2011, p. 103). We considered this approach to be appropriate, as we had no

preconceived theoretical framework that steered our analysis. Data that could not be identified based on these codes were marked with a new code (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Two other senior researchers similarly conducted this analytic process by co-analysing 15 per cent of the data material. This implies that they received the transcripts of the raw data material and started their own coding process in searching for recurrent and important themes throughout the interviews. In this context, Miles & Huberman (1984, p. 64) indicate that this 'double-coding […] is essential and get code consistencies over 90 per cent'. As such, this – in this case - triple coding allowed us to enhance the credibility of the themes found in the raw data and ensured the integrity of the work. As Floersch et al. (2010, p. 408) argue: 'if […] other researchers use the same dataset and followed the same procedures, one should find consonance in the assignment of the same or similar themes to respondent answers'. However, at the same time, the co-analysing process also allowed the two senior researchers to identify themes that the main researcher did not identified at first sight. As such, this process was not only about enhancing credibility, but also about bringing in new perspectives and readings of the data material. In turn, this process of consensus and dissensus actually enhanced a sound interpretation of the data.

Study 3 – Interviewing managers

In our third study, we aimed to revisit empirically the current knowledge about the role of managers in using EISs in social services in general and in relation to the creation of accountability. In doing so, we performed semi-structured interviews and we will now outline how we selected the participants, conducted the interviews and analysed the data that derived from these interviews.

Selection of the participants

When browsing the Flemish landscape of CWP, there are several social services that are generally regarded as important actors and also come into close contact with the development of INSISTO and the A-DOC. These are directly accessible care services such as Pupil Guidance Centres and the Centre for General Welfare Work (including the Youth Advice Centre), as well as indirectly accessible care services for Special Youth Care, some residential and others non-residential.

Based on their central role in the reform leading towards the Integrated CWP system and the use of INSISTO, we contacted these organisations with a view

to them becoming research participants. Firstly, we contacted 15 Pupil Guidance Centres, 11 Centres for General Welfare Work and 22 services for Special Youth Care in East Flanders, as it was involved in the Integrated CWP reform as a pilot region. This implies that it was the first region to be reorganised and restructured as a result of the CWP reform. They therefore also had the most experience of working with INSISTO and the A-DOC. Important to note here is that there was no selection made in advance between these organisations. We contacted all of them, without exception.

However, in the process of contacting these organisations, the Centres for General Welfare Work made it clear that they did not come into close contact with INSISTO and felt that they were not familiar enough with the EIS to participate in the research. We therefore decided to cease contacting these services and to exclude them from the research. At the same time, it also became clear that the Pupil Guidance Centres were overwhelmed by the many tasks that lay ahead as they were also subjected a second reform that significantly restructured their assignment. As a result and due to a lack of time, our initial invitation to participate in the research received little to no response. We e-mailed all the Pupil Guidance Centres in East Flanders a second time and the centres that did not respond to this e-mail were also contacted by telephone one month after the second e-mail was send. This intensive contact strategy resulted in a total of five Pupil Guidance Centres from East Flanders that were able to participate in the research. Out of the 22 services for Special Youth Care, five responded that they were not able to participate due to a lack of time and work overload. Nine of them did not answer our invitations, even though they were contacted a second time by e-mail one month after receiving the first invitation. In the end, eight responded positively and participated in the research.

This encouraged us to contact 17 Pupil Guidance Centres and eight Centres for General Welfare Work (including Youth Advice Centres) in West Flanders. Again, there was no selection made and all of the existing Pupil Guidance Centres and Centres for General Welfare Work were invited to participate in the research. However, here, a similar pattern occurred as all the Centres for General Welfare Work refused to participate on the grounds that they had nothing to contribute since their experience with INSISTO was very limited. The responses of the Pupil Guidance Centres were also weak at first. We therefore e-mailed all of them a second time and contacted the non-responders by telephone three weeks after they received the second e-mail. In the end, all the centres responded. Ten of them were unable to participate as they were

experiencing a work overload, which can be explained by the two reforms they were coping with. Seven of them responded and were enthusiastic about participating in the research.

In total, 20 different Flemish CWP services – 12 Pupil Guidance Centres and eight services for Special Youth Care – agreed to participate and were incorporated as research participants. Initially, the general managers of the CWP services were contacted with the research proposal and a request to participate. However, in this process the managers quickly came up with other names and individuals in their organisation whom they considered to be important for developing and implementing an organisational policy related to the use of EISs. As such, through snowball sampling (Van Hove & Claes, 2011) several other managers joined the research. This explains why we interviewed 30 managers spread across 20 services. These participants were all responsible for the general and/or pedagogical policy of their organisation, including the way the organisation handled INSISTO and the A-DOC. Some of them were also responsible for admitting clients to the organisation, while others were part of a team of experts responsible for completing the A-DOC when needed.

Conducting the interviews

We informed all participants, firstly, about the purpose of the study before the actual interview took place. However, we were careful not to provide too much information about earlier findings, as we wanted to avoid steering the interview to a specific topic. All interviewees were invited to participate on the basis of a written informed consent. As a result, the interviews were conducted under conditions of confidentiality and anonymity. As such, participants were assured that the collected data would be fully anonymised and the names of third parties and institutions excised, thereby following the authors' university's research ethics guidelines.

Our method of data collection took the form of semi-structured interviews. Without wanting to repeat what has already been said about the advantages of this semi-structured format, we would like to point out that it enabled us to use open-ended questions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). We developed an interview scheme with some key questions that provided 'participants with some guidance on what to talk about' (Gill et al., 2008, p. 291). Hence, these questions stimulated the participants to reflect upon their position as managers and the organisational policy they developed in handling the EISs. First, they were asked to introduce themselves and describe their role within the organisation. Their opinion was sought on INSISTO and the rationale for

implementing such a tool, and their experience with using it in their organisation. We also asked them about the influence of INSISTO on their work and organisation, the positive and negative features of the EIS used, and their perspective on how practitioners should use EISs. We asked how they, from their specific position as a manager, handled the compulsory implementation of EISs, and whether and how they believed an EIS improved social work practice.

When discussing the selection of participants, some of the interviews were organised with several participants at the same time. According to DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree (2006), this is no problem at all. They all took place at the workplace of the participants to reduce the amount of time participants had to spend in contributing to the research. This was of great importance as the participants indicated that they were experiencing a high workload and had little time left to engage in other activities, such as research. The interviews lasted between approximately 45 minutes and two hours. All interviews were also audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Unfortunately, one interview was lost due to technical problems with the audio-recorder. As a result, 19 semi-structured interviews with 29 managers were used as data.

Analysis of the interviews

The data generated in the interview was analysed with the help of NVivo 10 (Mortelmans, 2007) via a thematic analysis (Floersch, Longhofer, Kranke, & Townsend, 2010; Mortelmans, 2007; Van Hove & Claes, 2011). A main advantage of this approach is that once the initial coding stage has been completed, recurrent themes occur that are based on the participants' narratives (Van Hove & Claes, 2011). In relation to this initial coding stage, we would like to make clear that this is an inductive way of working in which the data leads to certain codes or categories, rather than a pre-existing theoretical framework (Floersch et al., 2010). During this stage, codes or themes are often being renamed or reorganised into broader themes as 'the researcher is convinced that the different categories mean the same thing' (Van Hove & Claes, 2011, p. 192).

However, this does not mean that we did not use theoretical concepts when taking a closer look at the initial codes and themes once these had been completed. On the contrary, starting from our specific research question, namely 'what are the views and discourses of managers concerning the use of EISs to demonstrate accountability?', we used the theoretical concept of accountability to examine and analyse further the themes we had identified

during the coding process. Van Hove and Claes (2011, p. 191) point out that this is no problem as 'it is unclear just how a researcher can avoid applying elements of a theoretical perspective during the analysis process'. Finally, 15% of the transcripts were independently analysed by two other senior researchers for the same reasons the data in study three was also co-analysed.

Study 4 – Interviewing social practitioners

In the fourth study, we interviewed social practitioners to question whether and how EISs can make the actions of professionals 'on the ground' visible and thus contribute to the development of a responsive social work practice. At the same time, we also aimed to identify empirically how the strategies used by social practitioners relate to the broader development of responsive social work in a context of EISs and what their meaning is for this development.

Selection of the participants

The data selection for this fourth study took place in the Flemish Needs Assessment Teams. As we have already described the assignments of these teams in the introduction, we will not discuss them further here. More information about the teams is also given in chapter five. It is, however, important to reiterate that the members of the NATs work on a daily basis with INSISTO and make sure that all requirements are met in order to meet the objectives of the EIS. As a result, they were considered to be extremely valuable participants for this study.

In Flanders, there are five NATs, each with a variety of members and their own regional manager. In order to gain access to their employees, we first contacted the Child Welfare and Protection Agency of the Flemish Government. After consideration, they gave us permission to contact the regional managers of the NATs, who provided us with contact details of all employees, so we were able to invite them to participate in the research. All members of the NATs were contacted by e-mail and responded very quickly. In two NATs, it was the regional manager who provided us with a planning scheme instead of the individual members.

In total, 17 professionals are employed in the five NATs: five psychologists, one criminologist, three educators and eight social workers. For the purposes of this study, all of them were contacted. We would also like to clarify that although these professionals cannot be strictly defined as frontline practitioners, as they have no direct contact with clients, it is relevant to mention that they are still

regarded as 'social' practitioners, as the Flemish government deliberately decided not to engage mere 'technicians', but to install teams of 'social workers' with extensive experience in frontline work with children and families.

Conducting the interviews

Based on the contacts with the individual members of the NATs and the regional managers, all participants seemed ready to participate in the research. However, as always participants were first informed that the study proposal had been reviewed and approved in line with the University's research ethics guidelines. They were also informed about the content of the study and assured that the collected data would be fully anonymised and the names of third parties and institutions excised.

Also, attention was drawn to their right to withdraw during the interview process. This right was invoked by one participant, who made it clear that (s)he was not participating voluntarily but had been forced to do so by his/her supervisor. As a consequence, the informed consent could not be signed and the interview was not included as research data, although the participant insisted on talking to the researcher. This conversation took place but was not recorded or categorised as part of the research material. Thus, in total 16 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted between September and November 2015. This 'incident' had some consequences as in the interviews that followed, participants were not only informed about their right to withdraw but were also explicitly asked whether they were participating voluntarily in the research.

To gain insight into the day-to-day practice of the NAT, we chose to use semi-structured interviews. As already argued several times, the advantage of semi-structured interviews is that they enabled us to use open-ended questions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This was particularly interesting as the NATs were also a topic of debate in Flanders at the time that we interviewed their members. The use of open-ended questions enabled us to provide the participants with sufficient room to elaborate on what was at that moment an ongoing discussion about their role in the Flemish CWP landscape. At the same time, Silverman (1993) points out that 'if respondents are made aware of your interests, this can affect their responses' (Silverman, 1993, p. 206). In that vein, the use of open-ended questions encouraged the participants to come up with topics they found important as well, rather than being steered in a particular direction (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Gill et al., 2008; Van Hove & Claes, 2011).

All interviews took place at the workplace of the participants and lasted for approximately one hour with variations from 35 minutes to an hour and a half. In most of the NATs, multiple interviews were conducted in one day to limit the travel time of the researcher. With the participants' permission, the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis of the interviews

In parallel with the other studies, the raw data material was uploaded into the qualitative analysis software NVivo10 to assist the analysis (Mortelmans, 2007). In this study, we also used a thematic analysis to analyse the content of the interviews thoroughly (Floersch, Longhofer, Kranke, & Townsend, 2010; Mortelmans, 2007; Van Hove & Claes, 2011). After a first reading of the data, we devised codes that can be seen as themes that recurred throughout the transcripts (e.g. information about participants, NAT rationales, positive and negative aspects of the NAT, coping strategies, importance of a team, tensions between theory and practice, tensions between official and personal views on care, and transparency). These codes were devised as a result of the interplay between the data-led and theory-led approaches adopted (Van Hove & Claes, 2011).

This implies that, on the one hand, we let themes emerge from the data as they were touched upon by many participants and considered important by them, while, on the other hand, we also examined the data with our research questions in mind. We therefore used theoretical concepts such as transparency and strategies of resistance to complete our analysis. In the end, both sets of concepts are important for our research questions since they are part of the central aim of this study. Finally, 15% of the transcripts were also independently analysed by two senior researchers. As already argued, this enhanced the credibility of the data and findings, but also allowed us to identify, interpret and reinterpret important topics, patterns and conceptual links during the analysis in a consistent and reliable manner (Westbrook, 1994).

Ethical dimensions

The overall research design was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Psychological and Educational Sciences of Ghent University. At first sight, this might seem to be just a formal procedure. However, for us this is not the point. Being aware that we are reiterating a point we made earlier, we believe that performing research is never a neutral occupation. In the process, we interact with people ranging from clients, professionals, managers and

policy makers to fellow researchers. It therefore goes without saying that research is a practice – just like social work – in which all kinds of ethical questions come to the fore. Am I listening to what the participants is telling me? Am I paying enough attention to the participants' concerns? Am I steering the questions in one way or another and therefore not taking enough interest in the participant's story? Am I providing enough contextual information for the participants to understand the central tenet of my research? Am I aware of some of the possible consequences of what is being said during this interview?

These are some of the questions and concerns that were addressed during the research. In order to handle some of the concerns, research institutions as well as universities develop ethical and moral guidelines. They try to balance between the pursuit of scientific knowledge on the one hand and the rights of research participants on the other. Ultimately, they assist the researcher in building a sound ethical practice into the design and facing the dilemmas and moral issues researchers experience during the process (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Van Hove & Claes, 2011). There are different ways to implement these guidelines, but most often, they are operationalised by the use of informed consent.

In this consent, several elements are embedded, such as a brief description of the study and its aims; information about what will be done with the findings; an offer to provide the participant with a summary of the findings; a statement that participation is voluntarily and that every participant has the right to withdraw from the interview at any time without giving further information about their reason for doing so; and the insurance that the findings would be presented without disclosing the participant's identity or affiliation. As such, we guaranteed anonymity and protected the participants' privacy. That is also the reason why we refer to participants by a code number in the dissertation and when citing some of the participants verbatim (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Mortelmans, 2007; Van Hove & Claes, 2011). There are actually two options for creating an informed consent: verbal or written. In general, researchers are advised to obtain a written consent, except when there are very specific and significant reasons not to do so. This is, for instance the case when the researchers are working with young children or when performing covert field research (Van Hove & Claes, 2011). Given that such reasons did not apply here, we obtained a written informed consent from all our study participants and verbally reviewed it at the beginning of every interview. In this context, it may be tempting to reduce the ethical and moral issues of research to the framing of written informed consent. However, performing ethical research

starts and ends with the personal moral code of the researcher. Van Hove and Claes (2011) even argue that this 'personal moral code is the best defence against unethical behaviour' (Van Hove & Claes, 2011, p. 57).

Overview of the chapters

To conclude this introduction, we provide a short overview of the chapters in this dissertation in which we also describe what research questions are addressed in each chapter.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

In the first chapter of this dissertation, we have provided an extensive overview of the research problem, statement and questions. Furthermore, we have explained how we approached the research questions by describing in detail our methodological framework, methods of data collection and data analysis.

Chapter 2 - Governmental rationales

In chapter two, we will formulate an answer to the research question 'what are the governmental rationales for installing Electronic Information Systems (EISs) and how do these relate to the development of responsive social work?'

Chapter 3 - An area of ambiguity

Chapter three draws upon semi-structured interviews with policy makers to flesh out the motives, views and discourses developed by policy makers that lie at the core of the move towards EISs and their meaning for the development of responsive social work.

Chapter 4 - A manager's perspective

In chapter four, we will show empirically how managers from social services in Flanders handle the governmental imperative towards EISs in their organisation and what their views and discourses are concerning the use of EISs to demonstrate accountability.

Chapter 5 - Creating transparency: opportunities and pitfalls

In this chapter, we aim to uncover how social practitioners handle the governmental imperative towards EISs in their social work practice and what their views and discourses are concerning the creation of transparency in their social work practice through the use of EISs.

Chapter 6 - In search of responsiveness

Chapter six will draw upon semi-structured interviews with social practitioners to search for the meaning of the strategies they use in evading, shaping or bending governmental procedures for the development of a responsive social work practice.

Chapter 7 - Discussion and concluding reflections

In chapter seven, the final chapter of this dissertation, we summarise the main findings of our research and reflect upon what can be learned from our findings for social work in general and for the development of a responsive social work practice in a context of EISs in particular.

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CHAPTER 2

GOVERNMENTAL RATIONALES

Abstract [1]

Various authors have argued that electronic information systems (EISs) do not necessarily improve the responsiveness of social work. One of the main reasons given for these failings is the flawed implementation of EISs by professionals. However, we argue that the on-going debate fails to be explicit about governmental rationales for installing EISs. This article presents the findings of a content analysis that aimed to uncover the governmental rationales for installing EISs in the Flemish child and welfare protection (CWP) system. Our analysis revealed three clusters of rationales. The first cluster supports the use of EISs as an instrument to better match supply and demand. The second cluster shows that the gathered data also serve as an instrument for accountability. A third cluster focuses on the aim of creating more uniformity. Based on our analysis, we argue that it is not flawed implementation that impedes the development of responsive social work; rather, the governmental rationales themselves are flawed.

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, social work has prioritised the gathering, sharing, classifying, storing and monitoring of information (Hall et al., 2010; Keymolen & Broeders, 2013; Parrot & Madoc-Jones, 2008; Parton, 2006, 2009; White et al., 2010). In this context, social workers increasingly interact with a range of advanced technological tools (Bradt et al., 2011; Broadhurst et al., 2010), a development that is closely associated with the enhanced implementation of information and communication technology (ICT) in social welfare practices (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Bradt et al., 2011; Garrett, 2005; Hall et al., 2010; Hudson, 2002; Parrot & Madoc-Jones, 2008; Parton, 2009). This increase in interaction with advanced technology can be observed in numerous Western countries, such as the UK (White et al., 2009; White et al., 2010), the Netherlands (Keymolen & Broeders, 2013) and Australia (West & Heath, 2011), where social work is subjected to many reforms in which these tools are gaining importance.

Such developments have resulted in the use of Electronic Information Systems (EISs) (e.g. Gillingham, 2013, 2015). This rather broad concept covers a great variety of heterogeneous tools that are used for a range of tasks, such as recording and processing information, assessing the needs of children, providing direction for decision-making procedures and creating a digital recording platform for casework. Internationally, there are numerous documented examples of these EISs, such as the Integrated Children's System, an information sharing tool that should help to identify children at risk, and the Common Assessment Framework, a standard assessment tool used by all practitioners in the field of child and welfare protection (CWP) in the UK (White et al., 2009). In Australia, there is the Client Relationship Information System, an information and case management system that allows practitioners to record client information, and lastly, in the Netherlands, there is an information sharing tool to help identify children who are at risk, referred to as the National Reference Index for High-Risk Young People (Keymolen & Broeders, 2013; Lecluijze, 2015; Lecluijze et al., 2015).

Several authors have argued that this 'electronic turn' (Garrett, 2005) is the result of the belief that the use of such electronic systems will solve all types of problems (Gillingham, 2014; Wastell & White, 2014b). However, despite the widespread use of EISs and the belief in their possibilities, their implementation and the related implications for both professionals and clients has not remained uncontested (e.g. Aas, 2004; Aronson & Smith, 2010; Gillingham, 2016;

Parton, 2006; White et al., 2009). For example, several authors have suggested that EISs might change some of the central characteristics of the social work profession because they might overlook the ambiguous, complex and uncertain nature of social work (e.g. Aas, 2004; Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Garrett, 2005; Keymolen & Broeders, 2013; Parton, 2000; Smith, 2001). Others doubt whether EISs will improve the quality of social work because the practical implementation of such systems undermines the intentions of their designers (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Gillingham, 2013, 2015) or because social work professionals underuse the potential of these systems (Carrilio, 2005, 2008). In that vein, Broadhurst & colleagues (2010), for example, have shown how social workers develop various street-level strategies such as maintaining paper files or leaving forms blank to evade or reshape the pernicious effects of these tools. According to De Witte et al. (2015), such strategies negatively influence the data quality and undermine the initial policy rationales regarding the use of EISs.

Here lies a fascinating topic of research that questions why governments all over Europe continue to draw upon a variety of EISs to support their ambitions within the field of CWP (Hudson, 2002), notwithstanding the above-mentioned well-substantiated critiques. To date, several authors have already explored this question by examining the broader political forces that are influential in implementing EISs, aiming to uncover the governmental rationales for installing EISs in the day-to-day practice of social work. In doing so, some (e.g. Garrett, 2004, 2005; Gillingham, 2014; Wastell, 2011) found that specific forms of EISs are considered valuable instruments for the early detection of children who are potentially at risk. According to Parton (2008), this finding aligns with the emergence of the so-called 'preventive surveillance state' in which governments are keen to intervene at an early stage with the aim of preventing children's social exclusion and potential problems in their adult lives. To do so, these governments draw upon EISs by using, for instance, electronic flags for concern when practitioners detect criminal practices with regard to children (Garrett, 2004, 2005; Gillingham, 2014; Wastell, 2011). Furthermore, Burton & van den Broek (2009) illustrated that it is the intention of EISs to promote accountability, relying on the data derived from these electronic tools to achieve this goal. The authors state that the use of EISs in day-to-day practice generates significant changes in expectations about accountability because of the abundance of related procedures and processes. Supported by many other authors, they state that this development towards an e-government (Garrett, 2005) also aligns with a more general managerial tendency under which social work has been operating over the past few decades (e.g. Aronson & Smith,

2010; Garrett, 2004, 2005; Gillingham, 2014; Parton, 2006; Wastell et al., 2011; Wastell & White, 2014b). It is argued that these managerial ideologies and the organisational, technocratic mechanisms associated with this tendency can be facilitated through the use of EISs (Gillingham, 2013). In this context, the data gathered by EISs are often used by governments to assess the efficiency of social work organisations (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008), to support audit and monitoring purposes (Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Peckover et al., 2009), to create more transparency (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Coleman & Harris, 2008) and to measure the results of social work interventions (Van Yperen, 2013).

The insights provided by these authors are extremely valuable for further exploring the governmental rationales for implementing EISs in the day-to-day practice of social work. However, Garrett's comment that these insights might be 'somewhat abstract' (Garrett, 2005, p. 542) is still relevant today, as they are based primarily on broader political and societal observations rather than on empirically collected data. Consequently, the debate concerning the governmental rationales for implementing EISs focuses to a great extent on the influence of broad contemporary social developments, while the available empirical research concerning the use of EISs focuses primarily on the way EISs are implemented in social work practice and on the reasons these tools might fail to accomplish what they are designed to do (e.g. improve the quality of social work). In that vein, the debate tends to remain both rather general and implementation-oriented, with a particular focus on frontline practice. Therefore, we argue that it is important to go beyond this debate and undertake a more profound identification of the different rationales in order to strengthen the contemporary literature and empirically elaborate the reasons that governments are installing EISs in the first place. Therefore, studying specific EISs and their particular rationales is not the aim of this article. On the contrary, the aim is to empirically identify the generic policy rationales regarding the broad trend towards the governmental development of EISs, bearing in mind the existing diversity of EISs in the field of CWP and social work in general.

Based on this approach, this article aims to uncover the underlying rationales of governmental agencies regarding the installation of EISs for CWP in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Flanders is a compelling case in relation to this debate, as it is currently facing a profound reform of its CWP system, and the use of EISs is considered pivotal to improving the quality of the CWP system as a whole.

Integrated Child Welfare and Protection

During the last decade, Flemish CWP has been subjected to many reforms. To present a brief overview of the Flemish CWP reforms, we commence in 2004, when the Act of Parliament on Integrated Child Welfare and Protection was issued to meet the objectives of a Parliamentary Ad Hoc Commission on Special Youth Care (Roets et al., 2016). This commission exposed the severe fragmentation of child and family services, which not only resulted in striking gaps and overlaps in the provision of services but also led to ineffectiveness and inefficiency in the CWP system (Merckx-Van Goey, 1999; Roets et al., 2016). Therefore, the Act of Parliament on Integrated Child Welfare and Protection of 2004 required an inter-sectorial reorganisation of all welfare services for children and young people up to 18 years of age. These services, non-residential and residential, were divided into a variety of care sectors such as mental health care, child and family support and care for disabled people (Flemish Government, 2014). This reorganisation took place in order to reduce the number of referrals and to decrease the pressure on CWP organisations (Merckx-Van Goey, 1999).

However, despite the efforts of the Flemish government to reduce the number of referrals, there has been an increase in referrals and in the pressure on CWP organisations and a growing lack of capacity that have inevitably led to long waiting lists for children who are in need of support (Bouverne-De Bie et al., 2014; Roets et al., 2016; Vanhee, 2014). This situation led to a new Act of Parliament on Integrated CWP, approved in 2013, which fine-tuned the Act from 2004. It significantly reconstructed the child welfare and protection system in Flanders by integrating the various scattered youth sectors into one single organisational and conceptual framework, referred to as Integrated CWP. In addition, the CWP supply is being modularised into standardised packages of care, which can then be linked to one another to gain control over the fragmented CWP supply. Furthermore, a distinction has been made between directly accessible and indirectly accessible CWP services. The former type of service is directly accessible by young people and their parents without a referral, while the latter is accessible only by a referral from the so-called intersectoral gateway, which means that these young people and their parents are referred to the CWP system by other actors or by CWP organisations inside or outside the field of Integrated CWP, such as medical practitioners or youth psychiatrists (Flemish Government, 2013; Roets et al., 2016; Vanhee, 2014).

This reform has been – and still is – promoted by the government as a shift from a supply-driven system to a CWP system that is responsive to the needs of the client (De Koster, 2007). Some scholars (e.g. Voogd and Wiertsema, 1999, cited in van der Laan, 2003) even consider this shift a Copernican Revolution: a transition towards responsive social work that is user-driven instead of service-driven and in which the clients' needs, rather than the interests and ideas of social services, are the central focus. To realise this Copernican Revolution, the Flemish government has invested in a great variety of better EISs. These EISs, such as: (1) BINC, which provides a digital platform for recording information about service users; (2) INSISTO, which provides digital means to make risk assessments; and (3) DOMINO, which also provides a digital platform for monitoring case trajectories and making assessments, can be considered standard assessment and decision-making tools to be used by all professional organisations and social workers within the Flemish CWP system. According to several Flemish policy actors, these EISs and the use of the information they gather will undoubtedly improve the quality of CWP in Flanders by contributing to a responsive and transparent CWP system (Vanackere, 2007, 2008; Vandeurzen, 2011).

The logic of the database

As stated above, several studies suggest that the use of EISs in day-to-day social work practice does not self-evidently lead to the development of a responsive social work system (e.g. Aas, 2004; Garrett, 2005; Gillingham, 2015; Parton, 2006; White et al., 2009). For example, a study performed by White et al. (2010) shows that practitioners are spending between 60 per cent and 80 per cent of their available time behind their computers. This makes it difficult for them to engage meaningfully with clients (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Pithouse et al., 2012). Because of this, practitioners are placed in a position of tension between doing the right things (engaging meaningfully with clients) and doing things right (ticking boxes) (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Pithouse et al., 2012). In this context, the street- level bureaucrat is in danger of evolving into what is called a screen-level bureaucrat who operates primarily behind his computer screen and whose contact with clients happens solely through or in the presence of a computer screen (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Van Nijnatten, 2004). The evolution towards this so-called screen-level bureaucracy leads to a narrowing of the relational aspects of social work (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Parton, 2006), as 'the nature of practice and the knowledge which both informs and characterises it [ICT] is less concerned with the relational and social

dimensions of the work and more with the informational' (Parton, 2009, p. 715). The result, as Parton (2009) argues, is that the relationship between practitioners and clients is stripped of its social significance. Therefore, the amount of technicality increases (Parton, 2009), whereas the capacity for professional judgement and uncertainty decreases (White et al., 2010).

At the same time, practitioners and researchers argue that the discretionary power of individual professionals is curtailed (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Parton, 2006; Pithouse et al., 2012; Tsui & Cheung, 2004). For example, in his research, Jones (2001) was told by practitioners how managers urged them to avoid any form of intense relationships with clients, as this would make it difficult to make an objective assessment. According to Parton (2006), practitioners are compelled to follow procedural guidance, causing a reduction of professional space to manoeuvre. As such, there is less discretion to identify what information is considered relevant (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002). This task is now performed by ICT including EISs (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Parton, 2009), mainly following the logic of the database (Parton, 2006).

Next to a curtailment of discretionary power, research has also shown the emergence of decontextualisation. This refers to a process by which clients, figuratively speaking, are disconnected from their social and relational contexts (Aas, 2004; Bradt et al., 2011; Hall et al., 2010; White et al., 2010), as EISs tend to leave out important information regarding their social and relational contexts (Hall et al., 2010). According to Hall et al. (2010), this process of decontextualisation has been stimulated by the growing importance of ICT in day-to-day practice, in particular by the emergence of fixed templates that aim to assist practitioners to fill in client data (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; White et al., 2009). These templates, which are very common within EISs, tend to structure and split the client's life story (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Pithouse et al., 2012; White et al., 2009) purely with the purpose of fitting it into pre-determined boxes and algorithms (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; White et al., 2009). Client data that do not fit in these templates therefore seem to disappear or be lost (Parton, 2009), as these templates seldom provide additional space to give extra information (White et al., 2009).

Consequently, a client's situation is split into a series of data elements, and this risks breaking up the holistic view of the client's life story (Aas, 2004; Pithouse et al., 2012). Consequently, et al. (2010) argue that children are being disaggregated from their family because the 'family file' is being replaced by a

'child-centered file'. The outcome of such a splitting process is that the complexity of the client's situation is left out of the account (Bradt et al., 2011; Gillingham, 2015; Lorenz, 2007; Parton, 2006). This results in social work being based, again, mainly on the logic of the database (Parton, 2006). This trend towards an increased emphasis on a database mentality (Aas, 2004; Parton, 2009) is disturbing because the information gathered by these databases is genuinely different from that gathered by narratives (Lash, 2002; Manovich, 2001, p. 199); thus, it is less responsive to the real-life world of clients.

As illustrated by the previous discussions, the research literature on EISs has indisputably paid considerable attention to the negative effects of such tools on the relational and frontline perspectives of social work. At the same time, several authors (e.g. Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Garrett, 2004, 2005; Parton, 2006; Wastell & White, 2014a) have also provided some account of governmental agendas for implementing EISs, as illustrated in the introduction. However, as already stipulated, this debate remains largely implementation-oriented on the one hand and focused on the influence of broad contemporary developments on the other hand. Consequently, the in-depth governmental rationales for installing EISs in social work practice in the first place are the subject of discussion, but are still empirically underexplored. Thus, it is important to empirically identify and gain insight into these rationales in order to gain a more profound understanding of the reasons why government agencies are keen to install EISs in social work practice. To accomplish this goal, we analysed all relevant policy documents within the Flemish CWP context using a conventional qualitative content analysis method (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). As such, we aimed to uncover the objectives that governmental agencies are trying to achieve by installing various EISs.

In the following sections, we first outline the methodological framework of our study, after which we elaborate the meaning of the underlying governmental rationales for the alleged Copernican Revolution towards a responsive CWP system.

Methodological framework

The data used in this study are based on a qualitative document analysis of secondary sources including all Flemish government documents from 1999 to 2014 relating to the subject of EISs in the field of CWP. Hence, the perspective of the government was largely captured in the analysis of 47 official policy documents, including ten Acts of Parliaments; seven committee reports; three

written questions from Members of the Flemish Parliament addressed to the Flemish Minister of Welfare, Public Health and Family; three statements of advice from the Council of State; four verbal questions and interpellations from Members of the Flemish Parliament; 12 Policy Notes; and eight other non-categorised policy documents, such as evaluation papers.

To analyse these documents, we conducted a conventional qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) between May and September 2014. To gain a sense of the entire collection of information and to interpret the content of the text data, these policy documents were read several times. Afterwards, a coding process was initiated with the help of Nvivo10. Based on some non-predetermined categories drafted after a first reading of the policy documents (e.g. reflection, EISs, efficiency, efficacy and gaining information), the coding process started immediately. Data that could not be categorised using these codes were marked with a new code (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This allowed us to identify and interpret important topics and patterns throughout the analysis.

Findings

During our analysis, we discovered a range of concepts and governmental rationales. We divided them into three broad themes, hereafter referred to as clusters of governmental rationales. The first cluster supports the use of EISs as an instrument to better match supply and demand. The second cluster shows that the gathered data also serve as an instrument for accountability. The third and last cluster focuses on the aim of creating more uniformity in the field of CWP through the use of EISs. In what follows, we discuss these three clusters one by one and illustrate our findings with various quotes from the analysed policy documents. These quotes were translated from Dutch into English.

Matching

The first cluster of governmental rationales that was revealed by our analysis shows that the various EISs are perceived as instruments for better matching in terms of balancing supply and demand, especially as these tools generate data that can be used at a policy level to correct and adjust the CWP supply. As such, the information gathered and generated by these EISs might also help clients receive appropriate help faster. For example, 'bringing together the supply and demand balance at a higher level than that of the individual practitioner might lead to better matching' (Commission for Welfare Public Health and Family, 2006, p. 29).

The analysis also shows that the Flemish government is keen to use the gathered data to increase the efficacy and efficiency of the CWP system and all CWP organisations. By gathering information and gaining insight into the inflow into the CWP system and by sharing information between several CWP organisations and their practitioners, it is hoped that all actors involved can take action to increase their efficiency and efficacy. This emphasis on efficacy and efficiency is a common theme running through all the analysed policy documents and is defined by the Flemish government primarily in terms of harmonising the supply and demand balance. For example, it has been claimed that the BINC 'will enable CWP organisations to compare their capacity for care and ways of working. This benchmark will then trigger a sectorial debate on efficacy and efficiency' (Vandeurzen, 2010, p. 51). Furthermore, our analysis shows that the Flemish government tends to use the gathered data to reflect on and gain insight into the CWP field as a whole. Policy actors state that by means of these generated data, they attempt to gain insight into and reflect on the target group and the population of CWP, the valid capacity, the clients' case trajectories and the balance between supply and demand, with the aim of harmonising it:

> *Based on the systematic collection and exchange of data, we (the Flemish government, red) want to communicate about the target group of the CWP system, the client's case trajectories (on the case level as well as on the level of the CWP system) and the match between supply and demand balance. (Agency for Youth Welfare, 2014, p. 12)*

Legitimation

The second cluster of governmental rationales that emerged from the analysis aligns with the findings of Burton & van den Broek (2009), who found that EISs are seen as instruments for accountability. On the one hand, this refers to accountability to the government, which wants to gain insight into and reflect on the public cost of CWP and related employment, the demand for help and the social developments that explain the increasing demand for help. The government states that it is 'thinking about the information with regard to capacity, the use of the care supply and the cost of the CWP system and its employees. This should help us in making policy decisions' (Vandeurzen, 2009, p. 58). On the basis of these gathered data, policy actors want to reflect on the way CWP is organised; on its effects on the lives of children, young people and parents; and on the inflow and outflow of clients. In other words, they would like to consider how CWP may or may not make a difference. The policy actors state as follows:

> *through long-term follow-up research, we want to get a picture of the population and any apparent evolutions within this population, as well as the clients' case trajectories and the effects of CWP on the children's, young people's and parents' lives who make use of the CWP system. (Heeren, 2009, p. 13)*

Several policy documents even claim that this type of reflection will contribute to the dynamic development of the CWP system and might stimulate innovation. For example, these documents make the following assertion, 'the data collected from the EISs must be made available for scientific research and should also form a basis for reflection, a process that can lead to innovation' (Schryvers, 2012, p. 9). On the other hand, the EISs are also considered to serve as a way to legitimise CWP organisations and their practitioners in the eyes of the government. These tools generate data by which CWP organisations can justify and even increase their requests for government funding. For instance, the following observation has been made, 'this tool (DOMINO, red) is used for the approval and subsidisation of CWP organisations as well as to execute contracts with these organisations' (Schryvers, 2012, p. 9).

Creating uniformity

Lastly, our analysis shows that these EISs are also installed in the pursuit of uniformity. By creating these tools, the Flemish government is attempting to create a common language so that CWP organisations and their practitioners can understand each other better when communicating. According to the Flemish government, this common language will have a positive effect on the data flow among CWP organisations and will stimulate benchmarking among all organisations. The Flemish government makes the following claim, 'the CWP Agency is working on a uniform data registration to stimulate the debate about and the evaluation of the care that is offered for minors. To achieve this, several tools are being employed' (Vandeurzen, 2011, p. 51). This, in turn, will result in an increased quality of the care offered. Furthermore, it is believed that one uniform language will also solve the problem of fragmentation, a process in which the holistic perspective on the client's care process is lost as a result of receiving support from different organisations within the field of Integrated CWP:

> *When a user receives help from different organisations, this automatically leads to a fragmented case file in which no one has a clear overview of the totality of the need for care and the care that has already been provided. The lack of standardisation, the lack of a*

> *common conceptual framework, the use of different software programs and the legal concerns related to the sharing of data are hindering efficient help. (Flemish Government, 2014, p. 5)*

Discussion and concluding reflections

Focusing primarily on Flemish government documents relating to the subject of EISs in the field of CWP, we empirically deepened and elaborated the governmental rationales for implementing EISs in day-to-day social work practice. In doing so, our analysis revealed that in Flanders, the government is installing EISs because it assumes that these systems will balance supply and demand, account for the public cost of CWP and create uniformity across all CWP organisations and their practitioners. As such, our findings offer valuable insights that can contribute to the existing literature with regard to understanding the governmental rationales and policy strategies related to EISs. When taking these rationales into account, two domains of major interest occur.

The first domain of major interest relates to the concept of efficiency. Research has shown that for governments all over Europe, increasing the efficiency of social work practice is an important reason to implement EISs (Garrett, 2004, 2005; Parton, 2006; Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008; Wastell et al., 2011; Wastell & White, 2014b). However, to date, the term 'efficiency' has often been applied as a rather broad and even chameleon-like concept that refers to more general tendencies. In light of this observation, our findings deepened the meaning of this concept by revealing how efficiency as a governmental rationale for implementing EISs is in fact twofold.

The first aspect of governmental efficiency through EISs emphasises balancing supply (i.e. the amount of care available) and demand (i.e. the amount of care requested). However, this is bound to lead to a number of consequences, as the idea of using EISs for balancing supply and demand is far from neutral. Not least because this matching logic characterises a pre-structured CWP system, in which the received care and support is not established through negotiations between clients and CWP organisations that emphasise the social context and the complexity of the client's life story (Roets et al., 2014). Instead, the care and support that a young person receives greatly depends on the CWP services available at the time of the request. This matching logic is grounded in the idea that every client who is not referred to the right services represents an inefficient use of resources. As such, this specific logic seems to align with contemporary managerial tendencies that often limit the meaning of

responsiveness to efficiency, but this propensity does not align with the real-life world of clients.

The second aspect of governmental efficiency focuses much more on promoting uniformity and creating a common language. The Flemish government believes that this will improve communication between professionals as well as between professionals and their clients. This governmental logic is based on the idea that EISs will ensure that all professionals do the same thing in the same circumstances (White et al., 2009), which in turn will improve the quality of the CWP system. There are, however, difficulties that need to be considered in relation to this logic. This is not only because the pursuit of uniformity and a common language ignores the reality 'that professionals have their own ontologies' (White et al., 2009, p. 1213) that these rationales seek to disrupt but also because the pursuit of uniformity implies a form of pre-structuring and predictability that reduces social work to a technical practice (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Tsui & Cheung, 2004). Put differently, the pursuit of uniformity and a common language ignores the interactional nature of communication (White et al., 2009) and denies the existence of noise, while 'noise has the potential to bring vitality and the hope of fresh patterns' (Serres, 2007, cited in White et al., 2009, p. 1214). Consequently, this governmental logic regarding uniformity inhibits the development of a responsive logic of social work. This is because responsive social work is characterised by attempting to connect with the complex fabric of the life of clients by not only taking the client's context into account, but also using the same language that the client uses (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009), rather than using than a uniform language based on the logic of a database.

The second and last domain of major interest relates to the governmental rationale of enhancing accountability through the use of EISs. Burton & van den Broek (2009) have already noted this rationale, and our findings can only support this notion. Again, the problem here is not so much that EISs are being used for accountability purposes. After all, there is something intuitively appealing about the idea of using evidence and data (Ames, 1999; Biesta, 2010) when allocating funds, for example (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Gillingham, 2015; Jones, 2001). The problem with this logic, however, is that it may hold back the progression towards responsive social work. In particular, our analysis shows that EISs are mainly used – on the part of policy actors – to publicly account for the cost of CWP in terms of effects; this is based on the belief that a more effective CWP practice produces a more economically accountable means of practice (Webb, 2001). The difficulty lies in the observation that this seemingly

market-based logic, which clutters the terrain of social work with concerns relating to efficiency, does not necessarily align with what clients and professionals describe as criteria for good care (Pols, 2005).

In this respect, we are aligned with Webb (2001), who provides a critical exposition of this logic by stating that efficiency cannot be the primary yardstick for professional accountability. Moreover, responsive social work implies that the search for appropriate help is embedded in the relationship between the professional and the client (Oostrik, 2010; Parton & O'Bryne, 2000); this relationship is based primarily on respect for the client's context (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009) rather than on what is perceived to be effective. As Aronson & Smith (2010) have shown, practitioners throughout the western social work sphere share this point of view. In their study, they found that social work practitioners feel that they are less able to do what really matters. These social workers are even worried that younger practitioners will not be strongly aligned with social justice goals because they have less experience with the more supportive and complex form of practice in which the older generation was trained (Aronson & Smith, 2009). Instead, these younger practitioners are overwhelmed by the pursuit of efficacy and efficiency. As such, professional accountability and the basis for deciding what is considered good care are more about quantifying output and doing things right instead of the quality of output (Burton & van den Broek, 2009) and doing the right things.

In conclusion, we argue that the rationales found in our document analysis do not contribute to a responsive social work system. In that vein, we are aligned with previous research (Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Garrett, 2005; Wastell & White, 2014a). However, we would like to emphasise that this is not because the practical implementation of these tools might undermine the ambitions of their designers (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Gillingham, 2013, 2015) or because professionals use these tools in an unintended way (De Witte et al., 2015), but because the underlying governmental rationales for developing and promoting EISs – matching supply and demand, creating accountability and pursuing uniformity – are flawed from the outset.

Of course, there are limits to what can be claimed from our study regarding the extent of what really happens in social work practice as a result of the hitherto implemented policy. Although our analysis notes that these governmental rationales inhibit rather than stimulate the Copernican Revolution towards responsive social work, this does not mean that social work practice itself is doomed to be non-responsive. Social work should not victimise itself as a

casualty of non-responsive governmental rationales (Hasenfeld, 1987), especially as the 'authors of a policy cannot determine the way in which their statements are interpreted. [...] The intended content of any document (what the authors mean) is not necessarily the same as its received content (what the document's "audience" reads)' (Evans & Harris, 2004, p. 886). Gaining more insight into these rationales might also help social workers to see that the policy rationales might be diverse, unclear and even flawed. Rather than curtailing the discretion to develop responsive practices, this might, paradoxically, contribute to the uncertainty that creates the need for discretion within the field of social work (Handler, 1973, cited in Evans & Harris, 2004). However, this does not mean that social work should remain inattentive to such flawed rationales. On the contrary, social work practitioners should continue to question them openly in a public dialogue with each other and with policy actors.

This concept of questioning and dialogue is important in relation to our analysis, as it shines a light on social work practitioners as a force for social transformation and the realisation of a responsive social work practice, especially in relation to the original rationales for installing these tools. The screen-level bureaucrat – someone who operates mainly behind his computer screen and whose contact with clients happens solely through or in the presence of a computer screen – (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Van Nijnatten, 2004) or what could even be called a tweet-level bureaucrat, as this individual has to fill in all types of text-limited boxes, should not despair because the existence of these non-responsive rationales is the death-knell neither for discretion nor for the development of a responsive social work practice. Several authors (Munro, 2005, 2011; Wastell et al., 2011) have already compellingly argued that new EISs can be designed without necessarily impairing the abilities of frontline practitioners by curtailing their discretion or taking too much of their time. Some of these newly designed EISs might even assist practitioners in their day-to-day work, which is often composed of intense relational and communicative aspects. However, although we recognise the importance of EISs that are designed to assist rather than to constrain or steer practitioners, the question remains: How and to what extent may a real Copernican Revolution towards a responsive social work practice arise while using the currently imposed EISs?

This remains, for us, a captivating field of interest that needs to be explored more deeply in the future. Emphasis should be placed not only on the design of new EISs or the flawed implementation of EISs, but also on the development of social work strategies to cope with the current EISs and enhance the

development of responsive social work in which the strategies in use are transparent. A research agenda should be put in place to map the strategies that are in use and to examine the level of openness and transparency 'on the ground' in social work practice. It is important to examine these issues at the policy-making level as well because there may be some slippage between what governments and policymakers say they are doing as a result of implementing EISs and what they are actually doing.

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CHAPTER 3

AN AREA OF AMBIGUITY

Abstract[1]

Child Welfare and Protection (CWP) has engaged in the introduction of Electronic Information Systems (EISs), such as electronic recording, assessment and decision- making tools. It has been argued that EISs have adverse consequences in which governments are conceived as homogeneous entities that install EISs for self-interested purposes. Consequently, research focuses on how social workers evade/reshape the sometimes pernicious effects of EISs. Insufficient attention has been given to the governmental perspective and to why governments install EISs. In this article, we contribute to this debate by performing semi-structured interviews with policy actors (directors, policy advisers and staff members) in the field of CWP in Flanders. Asked about their rationales for installing EISs, they spoke of administrative, policy, care and economic reasons. However, while advocating these EISs, they also expressed a critical attitude concerning the usefulness of EISs, hoping that practitioners would move back and forth between governmental demands and day-to-day realities, to establish responsive social work. This ambiguous situation in which policy makers seem to be both strong supporters and critics of EISs at the same time is captivating, since it seems no longer necessary to perceive governments as a homogeneous bogeyman and social work as a victim.

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Introduction

In many Western countries, Child Welfare and Protection (CWP) has recently engaged in the enhanced introduction of what we call, following Gillingham (2013, 2015), Electronic Information Systems (EISs). This concept refers to a great diversity of heterogeneous tools that are used to record and process information, assess the needs of children, provide direction for decision-making procedures and/or to create a digital recording platform for casework and so on. This development has in the UK, for instance, led to the use of the Integrated Children System (ICS) (an information-sharing tool which should help to signal children at risk) and the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) (a standard assessment tool to be used by all practitioners in the field of CWP) (White, Hall, & Peckover, 2009). Other examples include the National Reference Index for High Risk Youngsters (VIR) that has been developed as an information sharing tool which enables the signalling of children who are at risk in the Netherlands (Lecluijze, Penders, Feron, & Horstman, 2015).

The use of such EIS within social work practice is not necessarily new, but the claim that these tools will contribute to a more transparent and responsive CWP system has gained a much greater significance in recent years (Bradt, Roose, Bouverne-De Bie, & De Schryver, 2011). At the same time, there is a growing body of literature which illuminates how these tools have adverse consequences, such as squeezing out social workers' discretion (see Aas, 2004; Aronson & Smith, 2009; Parton, 2006). In contemporary research on this topic, there is a tendency to focus either on the development of a better implementation process of EISs (e.g. De Witte, Declercq, & Hermans, 2015; Gillingham, 2016) or on the strategies of managers and practitioners to evade and/or reshape the pernicious effects of these tools (Broadhurst, Hall, Wastell, White, & Pithouse, 2010). Although these insights are valuable to our discussion and the broader debate concerning the use of EISs in social work, it is our contention that research has given insufficient attention to the governmental perspective. Questions on the reasons for governmental policy makers to install these EISs and their rationales and ambitions are often ignored. In previous research, we analysed Flemish policy documents from 1999 until 2014 relating to the subject of EISs in the field of CWP. This study revealed three main clusters of governmental rationales for installing EISs in the Flemish CWP system: (i) a better match of care supply and care demand, (ii) the enhancement of legitimation and accountability and (iii) the creation of a more uniform CWP system. However, through this document analysis, we were unable to capture

or draw conclusions concerning the diversity of motives, views and rationales from policy makers themselves, although these might actually provide important in-depth explanations of the governmental rationales for contributing to the development of installing EISs, not least since policy documents are often written to communicate broad information to other policy makers as well as society. In that vein, policy documents tend to be rather vague and superficial (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), while we are also looking for in-depth explanations and rationales from policy makers at first hand. In doing so, we emphasise that it is not the contention of this article to study specific EISs and their own specific rationales such as a decision-making tool or an assessment tool. We rather want to capture the generic policy rationales regarding the broad governmental movement towards EISs, bearing in mind the existing diversity of EISs in the field of CWP.

Therefore, in the first part of this article, we provide an overview of the ongoing debate regarding the use of EISs in social work. In the second, we identify and capture this existing gap in contemporary literature by focusing on the diversity of rationales from the policy makers themselves and the meaning of these rationales for social work and CWP in particular.

The debate on EISs in social work

A managerial tendency

When seeking rationales for the enhanced importance of EISs in social work, several authors refer to an increased market-oriented governmental context in which Western social work has been operating over the last few decades (Aronson & Smith, 2010; Parton, 2006). This development, often referred to as managerialism, has been perceived as a pragmatic response to new challenges in contemporary society (Coleman & Harris, 2008) and has been augmented by the increasingly poor economic circumstances of the last few years (Taylor, 2009). It highlights managerial ideologies and organisational mechanisms that—so it is argued—can be facilitated through the use of EISs (Gillingham, 2013). In this context, data gathered by these systems are often used by governments to assess the efficiency of social work organisations (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008), for audit and monitoring purposes (Peckover, Hall, & White, 2009), to create more transparency (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Coleman & Harris, 2008) and to measure the results of social work interventions (Van Yperen, 2013). Furthermore, scholars have argued that these EISs are also used for other managerial objectives such as performance measurements (Aronson &

Smith, 2010; Taylor, 2009) by which practitioners are required to measure actual improvements in people's lives, based on what is efficient (what actions are likely to produce the most good for the least cost) rather than on what is effective (what actions are likely to work well) (Banks, 2013).

The social worker as a tweet-level bureaucrat

At first glance, the idea of increasing the quality of CWP by enhancing efficiency, saving public money, creating transparency and as such measuring the outcomes and improvements of interventions through the installation of EISs is very appealing. However, among many professional practitioners, academics and researchers, there has been growing concern about this development. Several scholars have argued that, when EISs are combined with the current governmental managerial context, they may not just support managerial goals (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008) but, in doing so, they may change some of the central characteristics of social work as a profession (see Aas, 2004; Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Garrett, 2005). For instance, research elucidates how EISs tend to split the holistic view of a client's life story by separating and disintegrating the familial, relational and social aspects of their lives (Hall, Parton, Peckover, & White, 2010) to fit into preordained text fields (Aas, 2004; Hill & Shaw, 2011; White et al., 2009). As a result, information that 'cannot be squeezed into the required format disappears or gets lost' (Parton, 2006, p. 262). This not only leads to a reduction of the complexity of social problems (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Garrett, 2005; Parton, 2008), but also undermines the importance of narratives in social work practice (Aas, 2004; Hill & Shaw, 2011; Parton, 2008), keeping in mind that these narratives 'provide a sense of coherence and continuity' in a client's life story (Aas, 2004, p. 387). Furthermore, research on front line social work illuminates how, as a result of EISs, practitioners are reduced to technicians as their discretionary margin might be squeezed out (Aronson & Smith, 2010; Broadhurst et al., 2010; Coleman & Harris, 2008; White et al., 2009). In that vein, Bovens & Zouridis (2002) argue that the street-level bureaucrat is being transformed into a screen-level bureaucrat, referring to someone who mostly operates behind his computer screen and whose contact with clients runs solely through or in the presence of a computer screen. In our view, such a professional could even be called a tweet-level bureaucrat, as s/he has to fill in all kinds of preordained and text-limited boxes. As a result, social work is positioned in a precarious space of tension between doing the things right— filling in EISs according to governmental standard procedures —and doing the right things —engaging meaningfully in a relationship with clients and their context—.

The government as a bogeyman

Here, social work often conceives the government as a monolithic, coherent and homogeneous entity (Thoenig, 2011)—a bogeyman who installs EISs purely for self-interested purposes. At the same time, research has taught us how practitioners and managers develop strategies to exercise their discretion and stand against these governmental expectations (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; De Witte et al., 2015). There are, for instance, many illustrations of how practitioners evaded governmental regulations, manipulated diagnostic criteria (Aronson & Smith, 2009), underutilised the possibilities of EISs (Carrilio, 2008) and even used their own paper-based methods (De Witte et al., 2015), while managers developed their own alternative versions of the system (Aronson & Smith, 2009) or 'worked around' the designed system (Pithouse et al., 2012).

However, as already argued, these insights are very valuable, but pay insufficient attention to the rationales of policy makers. Therefore, in the next section, we explore this issue through a study of policy makers in the field of CWP in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium). Flanders is a compelling case in relation to this debate, as it is facing a profound reform of the CWP system in which the use of EISs is considered pivotal to improve the quality of the CWP system. This has led to the introduction of (i) BINC, a digital platform for recording information about service users by which the government tries to capture what is happening within the field of CWP; (ii) DOMINO, a digital platform for monitoring case trajectories and making assessments by which the government tries to capture the trajectories of clients and streamline decision-making procedures and (iii) INSISTO, a tool for risk assessment and to provide access to non-directly accessible CWP (e.g. a centre for youngsters with severe behavioural problems). Through these data, the government is attempting to solve the lack of capacity and long waiting lists for children in need of support by strictly regulating the number of clients entering non-directly accessible CWP. In doing so, the Flemish government claims that these EISs will solve the striking gaps and overlaps in the provision of services as well as the ineffectiveness and inefficiency in the Flemish CWP system.

Methodological framework

The findings are the result of a qualitative study performed between September 2014 and April 2015. The research approach consisted of qualitative semi-structured interviews—a method which is considered extremely valuable to explore the views and experiences of individuals on specific matters (Gill,

Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008), such as the rationales of key policy actors concerning the use of EISs. As such, these interviews provided ample opportunity to explore in depth the rationales of the participants involved.

In Flanders, each minister has his own cabinet and administration, completed with a number of agencies which are responsible for the coordination of the policy (Verhoest, Voets, & Molenveld, 2014). As such, the cabinet, together with the administration and the agencies, are considered to be the main players in the policy-making process and in the coordination and implementation of that same policy. In relation to the Flemish CWP, the cabinet of the Minister of Welfare, Public Health and Family, his administration and the Child Welfare and Protection Agency, the Flemish Agency for Disabled People and Child and Family Agency are therefore seen as key players within the policy-making process. Based on this information and the information we gathered on the specific policy actors involved in the introduction and implementation of several EISs in Flanders, we selected and approached the most relevant actors through purposeful sampling (Polit & Beck, 2004). In turn, these participants pointed out several other relevant actors, who were invited to participate via snowball sampling. In that vein, eighteen individuals were invited to participate as research informants based on their role as a member of the cabinet, the administration or one of the three above-mentioned agencies. Fifteen of them—three members of the administration and twelve members of the several agencies—accepted the invitation, covering a variety of jobs such as managing director(s), policy advisers and staff members. Despite several attempts, no member of the cabinet participated in the research. All interviewees were invited to participate on the basis of written informed consent and were also informed of their right to withdraw during the interview process. The participants were assured that the collected data such as quotes would be fully anonymised and the names of third parties and institutions excised. The study proposal was reviewed and approved in line with the Ghent University research ethics guidelines. All interviews took place at the workplace of the participants, lasted for approximately one hour and were based on the same interview scheme (Mortelmans, 2007), which consisted of the main questions shown in Table 1.

Opening questions	(1) Could you tell me a bit more about yourself and your job? (2) How are you involved in the policy process of developing and implementing Electronic Information Systems (EISs)?
Transitionary questions	(3) How would you describe an EIS? Are they all the same? (4) Could you give me some background about the history of these EIS in Flemish CWP?
Key and concluding questions	(5) What is the importance as well as the purpose of these EISs? (6) In your opinion, how do professionals and middle managers handle these EISs? (7) How does policy cope with the criticism, given by researchers and professionals, concerning these EISs? (8) To date, a lot of practitioners in the field of Flemish CWP have expressed a questioning and critical attitude towards the implanted EIS. How would you convince them to use these EISs?

Table 1: Interview scheme

By consistently using this scheme, the interview sought to balance thematic structure with sufficient room for the participants to elaborate on their own perspectives (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Gill et al., 2008). All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Afterwards, a critical reading and iterative (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) coding process was initiated by the first author with the help of NVivo10 (Mortelmans, 2007), based on some codes drafted after a first reading of the interviews (e.g. conceptual ideas, ways of handling, reasons for installation and advantages, reflections). Data that could not be identified based on these codes were marked with a new code (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This identification and analysis was checked and validated by the second author to enhance the credibility of the data. This allowed us to identify, interpret and re-interpret important topics and patterns throughout the analysis in a consistent and reliable manner.

In what follows, we present the findings of our analysis by elaborating and discussing the different rationales regarding the development towards the

installation of EISs within the Flemish CWP as well as by illustrating our findings with quotes from the analysed interviews.

Findings

Throughout the interviews, some policy makers described the straight- forward ambition that, by installing EISs, they sought to improve the quality of the CWP system. According to them, 'there is even scientific evidence that shows that the quality of care increases, just by taking a step back and thinking about what you have to register' (4/5). At the same time, some of their colleagues criticised this —what they described as an instrumental view on CWP— as they were particularly concerned about a policy that marginalised the relational aspect of CWP, while this remains a focal point of the whole CWP process. In the words of an interviewee:

> *Yes, these tools can contribute to a better understanding. But the most important aspect remains the relationship between the client and his/her practitioner. That what happens in the dialogue between them, in that therapeutical process, should always outweigh the instrumental (13).*

A persistent concern throughout the analysis, however, is that it remains difficult to deepen this notion of quality. In other words, it remains unclear what policy makers define as increasing quality and, as such, there is rarely any articulation of how this might be achieved. Therefore, in the next section, we present three themes emanating from our data that reveal glimpses of what is meant by increasing the quality of CWP through the use of EISs.

Increasing efficiency

The first theme that comes to the fore throughout our data is in line with earlier research (Devlieghere & Roose, 2015) and relates to the rationale of the Flemish government that EISs will increase the efficiency of the CWP system, the CWP organisations and the social work interventions practitioners are carrying out on a daily basis. In doing so, policy makers often argue that EISs will better match the care supply (amount of care available) and care demand (amount of care requested) and balance and avoid unnecessary investments in what they describe as non-working methods. Also, according to some of the participants, EISs will speed up the CWP process—an argument that is aptly illustrated by one of the participants who makes a comparison with the online hotel reservation system Booking.com when asked how these EISs can contribute to accessing the CWP system more smoothly:

> *I think you have to take a look at the private sector. You can start calling several hotels in the South of France and asking around or you can ask comrades if they know where to find a suitable hotel. That all works fine, but I do not know if you have already used Booking.com. That is much faster and it is this same benefit that we want to generate with a tool like INSISTO (6).*

Throughout the interviews, several participants gave two concrete examples of how these tools can actually increase the efficiency of the CWP system as a whole. In the first example, some participants stated that these EISs will streamline and replace the paperwork and other cumbersome administrative processes practitioners are faced with. In the second example, policy makers expressed their belief that transferring information quickly and easily throughout EISs will counter the scattered and fragmented youth sector, which is considered a major problem of the Flemish CWP system. One interviewee commented:

> *Well, when everyone continues to do his own thing over the telephone; that is not very client-centred and as such, you also keep continuing the fragmentation. That can never lead to customised care, but only to frag mented decisions and sooner or later, we will pay a price for that (13).*

At first sight, many interviewees supported these claims. However, beyond this agreement, participants also expressed more nuanced viewpoints. For instance, they acknowledged that CWP practice cannot merely be organised on the basis of EISs just because they might speed up the information-sharing process or increase the efficiency of the CWP system. They asserted that these tools are quasi bureaucratic while CWP is, in its very essence, concerned with the relational aspect between practitioners and their clients, but also in between practitioners. One interviewee, for example, pointed out that 'You have an evolution, which is determined by law. What you see is something very technocratic, almost bureaucratic in nature, but no one prevents practitioners making a phone call and so on' (3).

Generating information

In the second theme addressed by our interviewees, a similar pattern occurs. Here, policy makers explained that they simply needed to generate and collect detailed and accurate information. According to several of them, generating reliable information is a condition for creating and implementing policy and EISs are perfectly suited to do this. They can, for instance, capture blind spots,

allocate subsidies to local CWP organisations and generate more objective information. As one of the interviewees commented:

> *Health Services are bound to their clients and if these clients really want to submit an application for recognising their disability, it can be hard to refuse. It can be difficult to act as an objective practitioner and say: I'm sorry sir, but your disabilities are not severe enough to recognise them officially as a disability and therefore, we will not submit your application. That is a very difficult message to give. We do not doubt that this message will be given when it concerns critical objective professionals, but that is the reason why we installed a neutral civil service (7).*

Interestingly, though, a similar pattern to that in the first theme occurs as there was also a discourse of ambiguity among the interviewees, as some of them exhibited a more questioning attitude. They spoke of seeking a balance between objectivity and rationality on the one hand—all of which can be facilitated through the use of EISs—and responsiveness on the other hand. In other words, they expressed concerns about the narrowing of the social (Aronson and Smith, 2009) and even counted on practitioners' creativity to stretch the rational discourse of these tools. As one of the interviewees pointed out:

> *You work in a dialectical framework [...]. You cannot underestimate the resilience and creativity of the practitioner. He will do his own thing with it and he will automatically, out of resilience, try to define his assignment [...]. Whether it is against this tool or another tool, the practitioner will always react against it. Why? From his wisdom, what I would describe as existential wisdom, he knows that these are only fragments of life and that he needs to place these in a larger perspective (10).*

This discourse of ambiguity continued as some participants challenged their colleagues' viewpoint of using EISs as an instrument for monitoring purposes. While interviewees pointed out that these EISs 'can actually monitor how the CWP system is working, how long it takes to pass through and how long a client needs to wait' (9) and, as such, provide information about the actions of professionals, care processes, population evolutions, case trajectories, staffing and cost of the offered care, others expressed their concerns about this particular rationale. In doing so, one participant explicitly points to the need for additional qualitative research before being able to make valuable statements about evolutions in the CWP system. In the words of this participant:

> *Of course, you get a global picture of what is going on. Especially when you can collect the data sequentially for a couple of years and you then compare them. Then, you get an idea of how CWP is working, but it will never be merely on the basis of numbers. Numbers alone won't tell you anything. You really have to place them in context (10).*

Creating accountability

This tendency of ambiguity continued as a third theme emerged from our analysis, where participants began by explaining how they sought to heighten and secure societal and professional accountability. Concerning the latter, several interviewees expressed hope that EISs would increase the level of participation and co-operation between the practitioner and the client, for instance, by filling in these EISs together. As a result, the practitioners' accountability for that which is taking place in the CWP process is not only immediately shared between the practitioner and the client, but is also made explicit. Here, one of the participants— supported in his opinion by several others—also explained how EISs enable practitioners to generate data that can serve as a basis for conducting—what he called—an objective dialogue with the client. He demonstrated this with a striking example in which he illustrates how data can enable communication in difficult situations and assist practitioners in being held accountable for their decisions. The interviewee illustrated this by placing himself in the role of a practitioner who needs to make a difficult assessment:

> *I now have spoken to you two or three times. I have visited you at home, I have investigated your situation and I decided to go to court. When you do that, the client has the right to ask you why. If you actually decide to go to court and you wish to convince your client or the court, it should be substantiated and well-motivated. It is a fundamental right of the client to know on which elements you are building your case. That is a part of the objectification of your assessment (12).*

At the same time, participants illustrated how EISs have the ability to meet societal accountability requirements. Apparently, these requirements are decreasingly related to the central task of safeguarding children in the first place. This is firmly illustrated by some of the participants when argued that, 'in these contemporary times of economic scarcity' (4/5), they have no other choice than to generate data, which can heighten the societal accountability of the CWP system as a whole. One interviewee commented:

> *I guess my core message is very similar to what I said earlier. It is so important that we heighten our societal accountability, especially in times of scarcity, but not only in times of scarcity. 360 million euro is a lot of money and we must say what we do with it (4/5).*

Interestingly, some participants argue that—besides this demand for financial accountability—they also experience a contemporary societal climate that is highly influenced by a control and risk management paradigm in which public perceptions of risk are omnipresent. According to them, contemporary society believes that by gathering the right information, CWP will be able to respond immediately and appropriately to 15 children who are potentially at risk as well as to report and document their interventions for the sake of accountability. One of the interviewees explained:

> *I think we have to admit that our society is organised in a way that it wants to control. They (society) shun the risks and they always jump on cases where apparently something went wrong. So from a policy perspective, but also from a societal perspective, there is without any doubt the question of: what have you done to avoid this case and what are the measures you took. So a kind of control flush has arisen that makes you obliged to know things. And this does mean that the 25 practitioner himself should have a well-substantiated file. It is a duty to be accountable, a duty to motivate why (s)he undertook those actions and no others (14).*

When deepening this quest for accountability during the interviews, some participants again expressed a more questioning attitude towards this development. They developed a discourse in which they stated that society should recognise that CWP intrinsically operates in a highly unpredictable and uncertain climate and that processes of predetermination, uniformisation and proceduralisation, all of which are facilitated through the use of EISs, might impair social work as a responsive profession. Or, in the words of one interviewee:

> *The first thing you get from a policy perspective is a reflex of control. And of course, there is a tension between that reflex of control and the individual freedom of practitioners. I really consider that to be a subject for a societal debate. But, what I notice at the moment is that there is a lack of courage from the press, Parliament and from policymakers to say: my shoulders are broad enough and we have to accept that CWP operates in a climate where risks are inevitable. That is definitely not the case at the moment (14).*

In other words, during the interviews, participants—from their specific position as policy makers—not only sought to legitimise the use of EISs from a more governmental perspective by uncovering a diversity of rationales for installing

EISs; they also explained how practitioners ought to handle these EISs in day-to-day practice. In doing so, they developed a strong discourse of ambiguity by fleshing out how they expect practitioners to move back and forth between governmental demands and procedures on the one hand and the day-to-day reality of the CWP system on the other hand. Therefore, in our discussion, we elaborate further on both of these issues and the relation between them.

Discussion and concluding reflections

The thoughts and views of the policy makers give insight into an often neglected governmental perspective by generating a broad diversity of findings, which provide an in-depth insight into the multifaceted process of policy making. In doing so, these findings reveal the complex struggle for articulating consistent reasons for the implementation of EISs. Asked about the underlying rationales for installing these tools, policy makers spoke of a variety of administrative, policy, care and economic rationales. From an administrative-oriented perspective, they seek to speed up the CWP process by transferring information more quickly and replacing paperwork. From a policy-oriented perspective, they expect these EISs to better match care supply and care demand as well to generate and collect detailed and accurate information concerning existing blind spots and ongoing evolutions regarding the CWP population. From a care-oriented perspective, these policy makers seek to increase client participation, reduce risks and monitor the actions undertaken by professionals. From an economic-oriented perspective, they expect to increase the efficiency of the CWP system, avoid unnecessary investments in non-working methods, allocate subsidies, monitor the cost of staffing and heighten societal financial accountability. These rationales are not necessarily new and confirm earlier findings (see Devlieghere & Roose, 2015). At the same time, these rationales—although they can even be driven by a concern for the client—seem to align with the idea that policy makers are actually attempting 'to pre-structure practice through a belief in the monotheistic privilege of procedure' (Broadhurst et al., 2010, p. 1060) and that they are relying on more formal methods, such as EISs, to do so. In other words, these rationales seem to confirm the contemporary idea that policy makers believe they can increase efficiency, enhance transparency and cut the costs of public spending through the use of EISs. In doing so, they even seem to present themselves as one monolithic entity, aligning with managerial tendencies which social work has to face.

However, and this is of critical relevance for our discussion, our findings have uncovered a more nuanced viewpoint. Throughout the interviews, policy makers not only sought to legitimise the use of EISs by illustrating their importance for the field of CWP. They also aptly expressed a more critical viewpoint about the idea of developing a responsive CWP practice through the use of these EISs. Many of them, for instance, expressed an intense questioning attitude towards the idea of using EISs to reduce the amount of risks in CWP or to pre-structure and even rationalise or objectify social work practice as they stated that social work primarily remains a therapeutical and dialectical practice. Participants even raised questions concerning the usefulness of these systems and the way these systems ought to be used, hoping that practitioners would move back and forth between governmental demands on the one hand and the day-to-day realities in which they are immersed on the other hand in order to establish responsive social work. Paradoxically, at the same time and from their specific position as policy makers, these policy makers also advocated the use of EISs by social work organisations and practitioners. This leads to an interesting but extremely ambiguous situation in which policy makers seem to be both strong supporters and critics of EISs at the same time. In doing so, they emphasise the importance of EISs for increasing efficiency, generating information and increasing accountability and at the same time point out the disadvantages of these EISs as they are perceived to be bureaucratic, too rational and unable to capture social work day-to-day reality.

While revealing this discourse of ambiguity, policy makers often referred to a contemporary societal climate in which the societal demand for financial accountability as well as for a CWP system where risks are being minimised has increased substantially over the last few years (Carrilio, 2008). According to these policy makers, gathering the right information will enable them to meet these societal aspirations and heighten their own societal accountability. As a result, they emphasised that practitioners need to provide extensive data about what they are doing (Carrilio, 2008) through the use of strict, preordained and preferably uniform EISs. In this sense, neo-institutional theory might provide valuable insights since it provides insight into how public perceptions 35 are becoming the mainspring for creating policy, while policy makers themselves are expressing a rather critical attitude (Villadsen & Mik- Meyer, 2013), as illustrated through our findings. This theory aptly describes how organisations, including governments, are in need of appearing in legitimate ways to the environment with which it interacts, in this particular case: society. In doing so, governments and policy makers are in need of creating strategies and methods to appear as legitimate actors. In this particular case, EISs are perfectly suited

to this task, since they convey the impression of a government whose knowledge base for creating policy is rational, objective and based on the data they collect.

As a result, technological instruments such as EISs are afforded a mythical status in which they are presented as rational, transparent and objective, regardless of what they actually do in day-to-day practice. According to Villadsen & Mik-Meyer (2013), this need for creating myths to increase societal accountably is not new, but conspicuously apparent in areas such as CWP, since they often 'produce "products" that are difficult to quantify' (Villadsen & Mik-Meyer, 2013, p. 91). According to them, 'such organisations tend to be evaluated on the basis of whether they use legitimate institutionalised elements' (Villadsen & Mik-Meyer, 2013, p. 91), such as EISs, regardless of their effect in social work practice.

In other words, these findings seem to constitute evidence of govermental window dressing by illustrating how policy enhances the use of EISs, while at the same time policy makers are uncovering a more critical viewpoint and counting on practitioners to handle these EISs with care. This in turn raises serious questions for social work and social work practice. This is especially the case since contemporary literature puts the emphasis on how practitioners should assert their discretion through developing strategies of resistance against possible undesirable and non-responsive consequences of governmental policy (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Roets, Roose, Schiettecat, & Vandenbroeck, 2016). Here, Aronson & Smith (2009) refer to the development of micropolitics of resistance in which practitioners and organisations (Evans, 2011) develop strategies such as going underground 'in which social workers try to disorganise organisational imperatives and unsettle narrowly functional practices that are structured by managerial ideologies while intruding on what matters to families' (Roets et al., 2016, p. 11). In doing so, they sometimes construct activities without informing anyone else about them (Roets et al., 2016), become creative in bending the rules (Aronson & Smith, 2009) or pretend to follow regulations while actually evading them and doing something completely different (De Vos, 2015). Paradoxically, our findings challenge this view through exposing how the current emphasis on the everyday resistance of practitioners against government policy is giving insufficient attention to the governmental ambiguity in which policy makers themselves are developing similar strategies of resistance by, for instance, expressing hope that practitioners will move back and forth between governmental demands and procedures on the one hand and the day-to-day reality of the CWP system on the other, articulating their disbelief in the possibilities of EISs to develop

responsive social work. As a consequence, we argue that, while most of these EISs were developed to create transparency, they seem to create a lot of ambiguity and concerns—not only on the level of social work practice, but also on the level of social policy. This, in turn, throws a different light on the tension between regulation and policy making on the one hand and the position and role of social work and social workers on the other. It might create opportunities for social work to act as a force for social transformation, especially since it is no longer needed to perceive the government as a monolithic entity, but rather as an area of diversity and ambiguity which is developing its own strategies for developing responsive social work, together, although in a different way, with social work practice. The question here though remains: how a development towards a responsive social work practice may arise while operating in these fields of ambiguity. This is, however, a captivating field of interest, which needs to be explored in more depth in the future.

Study limitations

Interpretation of the findings needs to consider the following study limitation. The sample of the policy actors is small and, although this sample seems quite representative for the Flemish policy context of CWP, especially since the aim of the research was to achieve an in-depth exploration of the policy rationales, rather than a general enumeration, the generalisability of the findings to other countries cannot be assumed. We therefore recommend that similar studies be carried out in other countries.

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CHAPTER 4

A MANAGERS' PERSPECTIVE

Abstract [1]

The public sector has been characterised by constant pressure to demonstrate accountability. To do so, social services rely on Electronic Information Systems (EISs). Here, managers are perceived as advocates of EISs, aligning with organisational and managerial mechanisms. However, research draws attention to a more nuanced viewpoint, showing that managers use their discretion to align with professional values. This prompted us to interview managers from Child Welfare and Protection services in Flanders to empirically revisit the current state of knowledge of their perspective on and role in the use of EISs for the purposes of accountability. Our findings indicate that managers accept the need for accountability and see benefits in using EISs to assist them in creating it. However, they are also worried that the current demand for accountability is fully encapsulated in the logic of the database and that the nature of accountability has become bureaucratic. In that vein and from their commitment to practitioners and clients who need help, managers develop, and encourage practitioners to develop, strategies of resistance. This demonstrates that managers cannot be regarded merely as bureaucratic executors of government policy as they plead for a more reflexive approach to accountability.

1. Based on: Devlieghere, J., Bradt, L., & Roose, R. (submitted). The Mounting Claim of Accountability Through Electronic Information Systems. *British Journal of Social Work*.

Introduction

Since the 1980s, the public sector has been characterised by a set of reforms aimed at implementing new forms of public management (Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Clarke & Newman, 1997; Leung, 2006). One of the driving principles behind these reforms is the popular rhetoric of managerialism (Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Clarke & Newman, 1997; Tsui & Cheung, 2004). While there is not yet agreement on a single definition of managerialism, it is generally agreed that one of its many overarching features is a constant pressure for accountability (e.g. Broadhurst, Hall, Wastell, White, & Pithouse, 2010; Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Falconer, Rhodes, Mena, & Reid, 2009; Leung, 2006; Munro, 2004). To date, many researchers have struggled to define the concept of accountability. It remains a chameleon-like and abstract term with a variety of manifestations (Leung, 2006). However, in general it is argued that accountability 'means that people are liable to be called upon to give an account of their actions or demeanour. This might include describing who they are and what they have done or not done, as well as explaining and justifying their roles and/or actions' (Banks, 2013, p. 593).

While there are many ways to demonstrate and justify what one does, social work increasingly relies on the ever-expanding possibilities of information and communication technology to perform this task. As a result, worldwide, a variety of electronic information systems (EISs) have been rolled out to collect, record and process information about organisational and front-line activities with service users, its aims and outcomes (Garrett, 2005; Hall, Parton, Peckover, & White, 2010; Parton, 2009). This has led to the introduction of EISs in, for instance, England (White, Hall, & Peckover, 2009), Australia (Gillingham, 2009), the Netherlands (Lecluijze, 2015) and the United States of America (Falconer et al., 2009). According to several authors (Mutschler & Hasenfeld, 1986; Schoech, 1999; Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008; Tsui & Cheung, 2004), data gathered by these systems will assist services in demonstrating and justifying what they do, as 'organisations need data to maintain accountability [sic] […] and practitioners need data to understand what they are doing' (Carrilio, 2008, p. 137). Both these developments – the demand for accountability and the implementation of a wide diversity of EISs in social work practice to meet this demand – have not gone unnoticed and have been extensively criticised (e.g. Aas, 2004; Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Hall et al., 2010; Parton, 2009; Van Nijnatten, 2004). For instance, Burton & van den Broek (2009) have argued that relying on EISs to create accountability is bound to

result in important changes in the nature of accountability itself. They even indicate a shift from professional to bureaucratic accountability, as emphasis is now put on 'quantifying output, rather than measuring the quality of output per se' (Burton & van den Broek, 2009, p. 1336).

These findings are important as they shed light on some of the unforeseen but pernicious effects of EISs on social work practice. However, in these debates reference is almost exclusively made to the consequences of EISs for frontline social work. In that process, managers are not ignored, but are perceived as advocates of EISs, aligning with a greater emphasis on organisational and managerial mechanisms. This does not necessarily come as a surprise and might stem from Lipsky's dominant notion of managers 'as a homogeneous group, committed to the implementation of organisational policy' (Evans, 2011, p. 371). At the same time, Burton and van den Broek's (2009) research findings on accountability and the use of EISs reinforce this idea as they revealed that 'there was a perception that managers have less concern for (more problematic) quality indicators' (Burton & van den Broek, 2009, p. 1339).

Although this might be true to some extent, contemporary research (e.g. Evans, 2011; Shanks, Lundström, & Wiklund, 2015) draws attention to a more nuanced viewpoint. In his research, Evans (2011) showed that managers actually occupy a interesting intermediary position between professionals on the one hand and policy on the other. In navigating between both stances, they also make use of their discretion to align with professional values. This, together with the idea that managers are considered actors to hold accountable for organisational output (Pallot, 1999) and for creating an environment in which practitioners use EISs (Carrilio, 2008), prompted us to interview managers from Child Welfare and Protection (CWP) services in Flanders in order to revisit empirically the current state of knowledge on their perspective on and role in using EISs in relation to accountability.

In what follows, we will first focus on the concept of accountability. We will look at its various manifestations and the rationales behind the increasing demand to demonstrate accountability by using data collected by EISs, as well as the consequences of this development for social work practice. We will elaborate on the intermediary position of managers and their importance for social work. We outline our methodological framework and present our findings, concluding by discussing their implications for social work.

The current demand for accountability

When closely examining contemporary literature about accountability, it rapidly becomes clear that accountability is an ever-expanding concept with a variety of manifestations (Leung, 2006; Mulgan, 2000; Walker, 2002). Many authors struggle with defining what accountability actually means and use it interchangeably with other concepts, such as responsibility (Mulgan, 2000). Nevertheless, amongst these authors and many of their colleagues, there seems to be general agreement that accountability is a necessity. In the end, social workers 'take on jobs with specific responsibilities and have a duty to account for what they do – to describe, justify and explain their actions in terms of publicly [sic] agreed standards and values' (Banks, 2013, p. 593). According to Banks, 'these standards and values may be defined by the profession itself and/or by the state in relation to the profession's public mandate' (Banks, 2013, p. 593). This is the same as Walker's (2002) argument that accountability is far from neutral and embedded within theoretical and ideological understandings.

Looking more closely at these understandings, as well as at the context (and thus standards and values) in which the current demand for accountability arises, two major issues come to the fore. The first relates to the current societal preoccupation with risk and especially risk reduction and prevention (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Garrett, 2005; Munro, 2004; Parton, 1998). In this context, the overall aim is to protect children from abuse, mistreatment and confrontation with violence (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Falconer et al., 2009; Parton, 1998). This stems from the belief that we are now able to control our own environment (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Munro, 2004), 'where previous generations would have attributed tragedies and failures to fate or God' (Munro, 2004, p. 1077). However, when CWP services fail to protect children from harm and 'an event occurs resulting in adverse consequences, someone must be held to account' (Gillingham, 2006, p. 87). This was the case in tragedies such as Victoria Climbié and Baby P. in the United Kingdom and Savanna and 'Maasmeisje' in the Netherlands. Here, practitioners and social services were expected to demonstrate their 'professional accountability' and publicly account for their actions by showing the outside world that they had done everything in their power to prevent the tragedy.

The second issue relates to the late 20th century crisis of the welfare state. The combination of – at that time – rising unemployment and high inflation impelled politicians to search for radical solutions (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Hudson, 2003). One of the dominant answers was - and still is - the creation of

new forms of public management, guided by neo-liberal principles. The leading rhetoric is one of managerialism, promoting the belief that 'better management will resolve a wide range of economic and social problems' (Alford, 1997; Davis, 1997 in Tsui & Cheung, 2004, p. 437). As a result, the ideology of managerialism not only shapes the global market, but service delivery and social work as well (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Evans, 2013; Jones, 2001; Tregeagle and Darcy, 2008; Tsui & Cheung, 2004). At the heart of the logic of this managerial rhetoric lies the need for an effective and efficiency-driven organisation (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Evans, 2013; Tsui & Cheung, 2004), as this is supposed to result in financial discipline, which will cut the cost of public spending (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Evans, 2013; Tsui & Cheung, 2004). This has triggered widespread awareness of how, why and where public money is spent. As a result, 'the current calls for accountability, while appearing to be theoretically neutral, are embedded within neo-liberal theories of governance' (Walker, 2002, p. 64). This implies a widely accepted idea that every taxpayer has the right to know whether their money is spent in an efficient, useful way (Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Garrett, 2005; Munro, 2004; Walker, 2002). This has not only led to more scepticism about taxation, but also to a heightened demand for financial accountability from the public sector to a multiplicity of stakeholders, including the public, government, colleagues and clients (Falconer et al., 2009; Munro, 2004; Walker, 2002).

In other words, the current context of risk reduction and managerialism provides us with ideas about the contemporary meaning of accountability, emphasising the need to demonstrate that (i) public money is being spent efficiently and (ii) practitioners are doing everything they can to avoid any harm to children.

EISs as facilitators of accountability

In attempting to demonstrate this financial and professional accountability, governments as well as social services seem keen to invest in EISs to do the job (e.g. Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Garrett, 2005). This is actually not surprising as these systems are capable of standardising and regulating practice by providing practitioners with a uniform structure of pre-ordained text fields and tick boxes to gather data about what they are doing (Baines, 2010; Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Carrilio, 2008). As such, the room for error is limited (Broadhurst et al., 2010) and the data gathered by EISs is perceived as rational and objective. This makes it easier not only to share information with other services and identify children at risk at an early stage (Broadhurst, Grover, &

Jamieson, 2009; Garrett, 2005), but also to measure performance outcomes and use them to demonstrate what is done with public money (Kirkpatrick, Ackroyd, & Walker, 2005).

As indicated in the introduction, this has led to the implementation of a wide variety of EISs, such as the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) in the United Kingdom, the Integrated Children System (ICS) in England, the Client Relationship Information System (CRIS) in Australia and the National Reference Index for High-Risk Young People in the Netherlands. This is no different in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), where (i) BINC, a digital platform for recording information about service users, (ii) DOMINO, an electronic platform for monitoring case trajectories and making assessments and (iii) INSISTO, a digital environment for making risk assessments and deciding who is eligible for care, have been installed over the last few years. Here, policy makers refer to the 360 million euros in taxes that are being spent annually on CWP and the need to use data gathered by EISs to demonstrate what they do with that money. At the same time, Flemish policy is also preoccupied with risk reduction, as policy makers press practitioners to demonstrate what they have done to avoid mistakes associated with tragic outcomes in order to cope with 'the control flush that has arisen' (Devlieghere, Bradt & Roose, 2016, p. 11).

The role of managers

This widespread rollout of EISs might convey the impression that there is a general agreement amongst policy makers and social work organisations on the use of these systems and their features to demonstrate financial and professional accountability. This is, however, not the case. For instance, Burton & van den Broek (2009) report that many social workers 'spoke of increasing expectations for detailed case notes, statistics and the construction of a "paper trail" for risk management purposes' (Burton & van den Broek, 2009, p. 1334). Furthermore, their research illustrated extensively how relying on EISs for making social work accountable has undesirable consequences for the nature of accountability itself. They conclude that 'such data, notably statistical data, support the managerial goal of quantifying output, rather than measuring quality of output per se' (Burton & van den Broek, 2009, p. 1336). Interesting here is that their research (Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Jones, 2001) found that managers 'instigate and reinforce the measurement of quantitative outputs often associated with financial call centre management-style operations and have little practical experience, or understanding, of the ideology underpinning child

protection services' (Burton & van den Broek, 2009, p. 1335). This very much aligns with the findings of Jones (2001), who was told by practitioners that managers urged them to avoid any form of intense relationship with clients, as this would make it difficult to arrive at an objective assessment.

These results might explain why the perspective of managers is often neglected as they are perceived as 'a homogeneous group, committed to the implementation of organisational policy' (Lipsky, 1980 in Evans, 2011, p. 371). However, recent research (Carson, Chung, and Evans, 2015; Evans, 2011, 2015; Shanks et al., 2015) has uncovered glimpses of a more nuanced viewpoint. Evans (2011), for instance, noticed in his research that 'practitioners tended to talk about managers in terms of their ability to provide professional support and guidance, rather than simply as agents of hierarchical control' (Evans, 2011, p. 382). In the same vein, Postle (2002) found that managers were worried that very little time was left for 'forming, and then working within a relationship with the person' (Postle, 2002, p. 342), as they were occupied with completing their paperwork.

These examples prompted us to revisit empirically the current state of knowledge about the role of managers in using EISs in social services and in relation to the creation of accountability in particular, especially since they are considered important actors, to be held accountable for organisational output (Pallot, 1999) and for creating an environment in which practitioners use EISs to achieve proposed outcomes, such as the creation of accountability (Carrilio, 2008). In the end, 'under the influence of managerialism, managers rather than front line staff are viewed as key persons in an organisation' (Pollitt, 1993 in Tsui & Cheung, 2004, p. 438). As already mentioned in our introduction, this led us to interview 30 managers from CWP services in Flanders in order to capture their perspective on the use of EISs in their social work organisation in general and on the use of EISs for creating accountability in particular, as the demand for accountability has never been so high (Banks, 2013; Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Leung, 2006; Munro, 2004). Before setting out our findings, we first outline the methodological framework of our study.

Methodology

Context

The data collection took place in Flanders, which is the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. In this region, a recent reform took place in 2014 which not only

significantly reconstructed the CWP landscape, but also made the use of EISs more pivotal than ever before. Though expanding on the varying reasons for this emphasis on EISs is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to provide sufficient contextual information to grasp the complexity of the current CWP system. The 2014 reform made a distinction between directly and indirectly accessible CWP. While the former is directly accessible for young people and their parents, the latter is only accessible through the so-called intersectoral gateway (Pollitt, 1993 in Tsui & Cheung, 2004, p. 438). The gateway organises eligibility for indirectly accessible CWP services, including long-term and specialised types of care such as out-of-home placements, psychiatric care and foster care. When a caregiver in the broad field of CWP believes that a child is in need of specialised care, (s)he is required to submit an electronic standardised form, the Assistance Document (A-DOC). This document can only be submitted through an EIS named INSISTO (Information System for the Intersectoral Gateway) and jointly with the child that is in need of help. The A-DOC consists of several components for writing down personal information as well as information about the child's needs, its current living situation, its strengths and weaknesses, its environment and diagnostic information about possible mental and physical disabilities (including test results). In each component, several actors, such as the child, the parents and other support persons, as well as the social worker, can give their own opinions. Once the A-DOC has been completed, it ends up with an independent Needs Assessment Team (NAT), which is part of the Flemish Government. The NAT will discuss and assess the content of the A-DOC and decide whether the requested help is necessary and appropriate. When the NAT believes important information is missing, it will contact the social worker who first submitted the A-DOC. Once they have assessed the A-DOC, the child receives a Needs Assessment Report that indicates whether it is eligible for indirectly accessible care and what kinds of service are considered to be most suitable. Afterwards, a Youth Care Planning Team will figure out which CWP services are actually available to provide the appropriate care and send the A-DOC to those services. At that point, the services can initiate the assigned care proposal, based on the content of the A-DOC.

Data collection

During 2016, 50 Flemish CWP services were contacted to participate in the research. In the end, a total of 30 managers agreed and were interviewed. They represented 20 different Flemish CWP services: 12 Pupil Guidance Centres, which are directly accessible care services, and eight services providing

indirectly accessible care, some residential and others non-residential, including services for minors with behavioural problems and sheltered housing services.

Initially, the general managers of the CWP services were contacted with the research proposal and a request to participate. As mentioned above, we wanted to interview managers in order to gain more insight into the link between the use of EISs and creating accountability. However, in this process the managers quickly came up with other names and individuals in their organisation whom they considered as important for developing and implementing an organisational policy related to the use of EISs. As such, through snowball-sampling (Van Hove & Claes, 2011) several other managers joined the research, which explains why we interviewed 30 managers in 20 CWP services. As managers, the respondents were all responsible for the general and/or pedagogical policy of their organisation, including the way the organisation handled INSISTO and the A-DOC. Some of them were also responsible for admitting clients to the organisation, whilst others were part of a team of experts responsible for completing the A-DOC when needed. As a result, the participants were able to elaborate on both their organisation's perspective on the EIS that they implemented and their experience in handling the system. Unfortunately, however, one interview was lost due to technical problems with the audio-recorder. As a result, 19 semi-structured interviews with 29 managers were used as data.

The semi-structured format enabled us to use open-ended questions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) asking participants to talk about their experience with the current EIS. They were stimulated to reflect upon their position as managers and the organisational policy they developed in handling the EIS. First, they were asked to introduce themselves and describe their role within the organisation. Their opinion was sought on INSISTO and the rationale for implementing such a tool, and their experience with using it in their organisation. We also asked them about the influence of INSISTO on their work and organisation, the positive and negative features of the EIS used, and their perspective on how practitioners should use EISs. We asked how they, from their specific position as a manager, handled the compulsory implementation of EISs, and whether and how an EIS improves social work practice.

These interviews generated rich data, which were analysed with the help of NVivo10, a software application for qualitative data analysis (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Mortelmans, 2007). The interviews were coded and divided

into several broad themes that emerged from a first reading of the interviews. For the purposes of this article, we focused on the theme of accountability. To enhance the credibility of the data and findings, 15% of the transcripts were independently analysed by two other senior researchers. Through this approach, we were able to reveal central and recurrent themes based on the participants‘ narratives.

All interviews were conducted under conditions of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were assured that the collected data would be fully anonymised and the names of third parties and institutions excised. All agreed to participate on the basis of written informed consent, thereby following the authors' university's research ethics guidelines. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. They all took place at the workplace of the participants and lasted between approximately 45 minutes and two hours. In what follows, we present our findings, which will be illustrated by excerpts from the transcripts of the interviews. The excerpts were translated from Dutch to English by the authors.

Findings

During the interviews, managers provided us with insights into their position on the development of EISs in relation to accountability. They explained that they considered EISs to be a tool that could help them to think more carefully about the necessity of expensive care. They also described how EISs were not suitable for demonstrating accountability and how, as a result, they developed an organisational climate and strategies to bend, reshape or even ignore government procedures in dealing with EISs. In what follows, we will focus on each of these aspects, first by encapsulating the managers' views concerning EISs in relation to accountability, then by showing how they translated those views into managerial actions within their organisation.

The perspective of managers

At first, almost all participants argued that the structure of EISs encouraged them to think and rethink whether all options for directly accessible care had been exhausted before handing in a formal request for more severe, expensive, indirectly accessible care. As such, they claimed that EISs enabled them to make well-considered decisions and inform stakeholders such as the client, government and the public about their decisions, which heightened their accountability. When asked whether the advent of EISs had changed this

process of reflection over the years, participants described how the structure of the EIS, in terms of preordained text boxes with clear aims and a straightforward path to follow, significantly structured their thoughts by consistently encouraging them to 'rethink possible alternatives for care' (13) and 'to keep an eye on the possibilities of the client and his family by looking at what goes well' (1). One manager illustrated the point thus:

> *It is a good thing that we are held accountable in a way that forces us to think critically. For example, when a minor – and sometimes minors are admitted from the age of three or four years old – becomes eighteen, then (s)he has been here already for fifteen years, and you notice that the organisation has the habit of protecting the minor as long as possible. When that becomes an automatism, there is no possibility for dialogue. The A-DOC encourages our teams of practitioners and our clients to think about the necessity [of the care provided]. For instance, what is the reason for staying in this residential unit? I consider that to be a good development. (11)*

At the same time, many of the participants also claimed that the use of EISs generated what could be considered objective data that assisted them in deciding who was eligible for indirectly accessible and thus more expensive care. When asked to clarify this idea of objectivity, one participant said:

> *Objectivity implies that there are some built-in standards. That … it is not because you know me that I will be able to do something for you. But, that there is a common ground for comparison, so that the care that is provided is appropriate. (13)*

This manager shared a general tendency amongst the participants to consider a formalised assessment, prescribed by bureaucratic procedures, to be a pivotal element in demonstrating accountability to the government and the public. According to some of the participants, EISs were able to capture the actual situation of the client, without being influenced by the practitioner's subjective feelings towards the client. Against this background, our participants often referred to the current financial accountability discourse in terms of cost-saving: 'That [indirectly accessible care] is really expensive for society. That there has to be a buffer and not everyone can access it.' (1) This discourse was reinforced in their responses to the long-lasting issue of waiting lists for children in need of indirectly accessible care, which encouraged managers to target only those in real need.

Beside these positive comments, the interviews revealed that the managers had mixed feelings about the contribution of EISs to accountability. Especially worrying for them was the lack of communication and relational contact

between the NAT that decided who was eligible for indirectly accessible care, on the one hand, and the practitioners and organisations requesting and/or providing the indirectly accessible care, on the other. Their main concern here was that EISs encapsulated a genuinely different logic from that of caring for children and their families. One manager told us: 'The system is way too formalised … We actually say that the spontaneity, the spur-of-the-moment in care has been curtailed.' (12). This view was shared by many other managers, who claimed that after EISs were introduced, virtually no other mode of communication was allowed between organisations individually and between them and the government. As such, they pointed out that the database and its logic became 'the single source of truth' (Peckover, White, & Hall, 2008), as only information that had been submitted through the EIS was seen as accountable. It was precisely this situation that was worrying for some of the managers. According to them, an EIS was not able to capture the whole picture, as there was a lack of nuance and narratives. One manager told us:

> *The categories used in the EIS are constantly being adapted and fine-tuned because they are looking for unequivocal coding and registration. But the more options there are, the more nuances you… you can never capture them all…. In the end, with registration, you always get the same story. (4)*

The actions of managers

As a result, some of the participants indicated that it would be helpful if they were allowed to deviate from the current procedures and regulations. One of them said: 'I think it would be good if an organisation is allowed to deviate from the standards imbedded in the EIS and also account for why they are doing that' (13). However, at that point, this was not possible and both managers and practitioners were expected to follow procedures. Many managers indicated that as a result, they created strategies such as contacting other organisations before sending the A-DOC to the Intersectoral Gateway, overshooting the clients' problem by exaggerating or withholding some positive aspects of the clients' situation out of fear (s)he would be rejected for indirectly accessible care because the current situation did not seem sufficiently precarious on paper. One of the managers said:

> *Sometimes you know where a client belongs and what services (s)he needs… But you need to get the story sold in a certain way. Translate what you see, what you observe. Because of the lack of available care supply, you need to emphasise when a client needs [care, sic]… You need to bring the client into the spotlight to make sure that (s)he receives the care that seems appropriate at that time. (17)*

This resulted in the creation of an organisational environment where managers allowed and even stimulated their professionals not only to talk about and share their concerns in using EISs to demonstrate accountability, but also to create strategies that deviated from government procedures in order to assign help. Except for a few managers who followed procedures more strictly and provided their professionals with more training when they fail to complete the EIS properly, most of the participants indicated that they provided the professionals within their organisation with sufficient room to manoeuvre and that they supported them in doing so within legal boundaries. When trying to flesh out why managers used these strategies and encouraged their professionals to do the same, we found that they referred to being a professional rather than a manager. In this context, one manager said:

> *When you need to plead in order to receive certain care, then you need to plead in a good, correct and dutiful way. And yes, when the right way of formulating things increases the chance that the client will receive the help that is needed, why not? (10)*

In the end, for many of these managers 'the interest of the client justifies the means as you want to provide the help that is considered necessary' (5). However, in their specific role as managers, our participants also indicated that they allowed their practitioners to deviate from regulations within legal boundaries, as they were still held responsible for the daily operations of their organisation.

Discussion and concluding reflections

We started this article by outlining how a new reality is impacting on social work as non-profit services, such as CWP services, are being influenced by managerial reforms aimed at increasing the quality of social work by putting emphasis on accountability (Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Clarke & Newman, 1997; Leung, 2006; Munro, 2004; Tsui & Cheung, 2004). We described how EISs are implemented as it is believed that they will assist organisations and practitioners in gathering data that will support them in demonstrating their accountability (Burton & van den Broek, 2009). In this debate, little to no attention has been paid to the role of managers as they are often associated with bureaucratic accountability and the implementation of EIS as 'being particularly compliant in accommodating to the neo-liberal agenda' (Jones, 2001, p. 559). However, recent research (Evans, 2009; Evans, 2011) demonstrates that this is not necessarily the case, which prompted us to

revisit empirically the current state of knowledge about the role of managers in using EISs in relation to the creation of accountability.

Our findings indicate that managers share the view that they need to be held accountable for their actions by fellow organisations, the government and society. This is not much of a surprise as being held accountable has always been an important issue for social work (e.g. Evans, 2009; Evans, 2011) and especially for managers in charge of social work services. Interestingly, though, when talking about accountability the managers mostly refer to financial accountability, thereby aligning with contemporary manifestations of accountability, as discussed earlier in this paper. The managers also see benefits in using EISs to assist them in creating accountability. For instance, they refer to the ability of EISs to stimulate critical reflection on the need for the requested care. Our findings might even convey the impression that the managers in our study share considerable enthusiasm for the idea that 'welfare needs to be more business-like, with […] standardised criteria by which […] the work of frontline staff can be more tightly defined and controlled' (Broadhurst et al., 2009, pp. 23-24) and that this will increase accountability to a diversity of stakeholders, such as the government and the public (Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Pollack, 2009). As such, it might be argued that Lipsky was right and that managers are a homogeneous group, committed to exercising policy by implementing it in their organisations.

However, our findings clearly show that this is only true at first glance. Many of our participants also developed a critical point of view, pointing to some serious concerns about using EISs to heighten accountability within social work. The managers in our study were worried that the current demand for accountability is fully encapsulated in the logic of the database and that the nature of accountability has become bureaucratic as they only account for what is being monitored by the EIS. Our participants agreed with Jones (2001) that such a reduction 'is in danger of creating an increasingly closed and defensive system' (Jones, 2001, p. 559). The result is that there seems to be no reality other than that produced by the outcomes of EISs. Ostensibly, this seems to be the case, but as managers feel restrained by EISs, they develop a variety of strategies or stimulate their practitioners to bend, reshape or even ignore current procedures. On this score, the findings further strengthen those of recent research by, for instance, Evans (2009; 2011), illustrating that managers also use their discretion to bend the rules. In doing so, they exaggerate the clients' problems, rephrase certain concerns or even create parallel circuits by contacting colleagues before admitting the A-DOC. This shows that the

managers in our study cannot be regarded merely as bureaucratic executives of governmental policy. On the contrary, these strategies stem from their commitment towards their practitioners and clients who are in need of help. They are – just like practitioners – worried about the paradoxical situation in which they are more than ever monitoring their actions to be held accountable, but 'surveillance is directed at the paperwork attached to the work, not at the intricacies of their actual practice with people' (Munro, 2004, p. 1093). In this process, our participants pleaded for a more reflexive approach to accountability as they believed that being accountable for one's actions is a matter of being constantly reflexive about the current situation and the actions that are perceived as most appropriate for resolving that situation at that particular time, as well as bringing one's decisions into dialogue.

This is interesting, as it opens up a new perspective on how such a reflexive accountability can be achieved in an era of bureaucratic accountability. For a long time, many researchers considered this a task primarily for front-line social workers. As a result, practitioners were often forced to go underground by developing covert strategies, as their managers were not allowed to know what they were doing since they aligned with a more bureaucratic idea of accountability. However, our findings demonstrate that this point of view is much more nuanced than initially thought. Based on the managers' perspective, we argue that they are pivotal actors in creating an organisational environment in which social practitioners are allowed to search for ways to demonstrate reflexive accountability without being condemned when EISs are used in different ways then they were designed for. We also believe that these managers are experiencing the same difficulties as social practitioners in demonstrating accountability through EISs. This, in turn, prompts us to rethink the position of managers in relation to using EISs to meet the current demand for accountability. Based on our findings, they can be considered as companions rather than opponents of practitioners in the search for a reflexive form of accountability in which the justification of their actions may not lie in so-called objective data produced by EISs, but in the dialogue with clients and other practitioners, organisations and policy makers.

The question remains, however, whether this is only the case in Flanders as in the Flemish context managers are often professionals who succeeded in climbing up the ladder, based on their previous experience with clients at the frontline level, and are now in executive positions. Further research is therefore needed to explore whether the search for a more reflexive accountability is also embedded at the managerial level in other countries.

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CHAPTER 5

OPPORTUNITIES AND PITFALLS

Abstract [1]

Over the past few decades, governments all over Europe have drawn upon a diversity of Electronic Information Systems (EISs). One of the aims of these EISs is the creation of a transparent Child Welfare and Protection (CWP) system. In that context, Gillingham and Graham (2016) argue that the implementation of EISs in social work has made the daily work of practitioners visible in ways that social workers in the 1970s and 1980s would have find unimaginable. However, this has not gone unchallenged as research reveals that practitioners develop strategies which can also undermine the aim of transparency. This paper aims to capture the tension between this aim and the reality of social work practice in using EISs. We undertook semi-structured interviews with 17 social practitioners and uncovered a complex struggle in which practitioners showed how EISs are capable of both increasing and hindering the creation of transparency. We therefore argue that the problem does not lie so much in the implementation or design of EISs but in the idea that transparency can be increased by EISs.

1. Based on: Devlieghere, J., Bradt, L., & Roose, R. (re-submitted). Creating Transparency through Electronic Information Systems (EIS): Opportunities and Pitfalls. *British Journal of Social Work*.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the central focus of Child Welfare and Protection (CWP) has dramatically changed as social services and social practitioners have increasingly been confronted with a widespread demand to collect, gather and share information about their activities with service users and service organisations (Schoech, Fitch, Macfadden & Schkad, 2001; Parton, 2009; Hall, Parton, Peckover, White, 2010; White, Wastell, Broadhurst, Hall, 2010). This has led to a series of reforms that have profoundly reshaped CWP systems by implementing a great diversity of Electronic Information Systems (EISs) (Garrett, 2005; Gillingham, 2013). This development has been stimulated by the growing potential of information and communications technology (ICT) and has often been pursued by governments keen to invest in technology (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Hudson, 2002; Garrett, 2005; Hall et al., 2010), augmented by the belief that EISs could solve a wide range of social and organisational problems (Wastell & White, 2014).

Although research has demonstrated that the current influence of EISs on social work practice is alarming to the social work profession (Aas, 2004; Parton, 2006; White, Hall, Peckover, 2009), governments all over Europe keep drawing upon a variety of EISs to achieve several aims within the field of CWP (e.g. Hudson, 2002; Falconer, Rhodes, Mena, Reid, 2009). One of these aims lies in making everything at every level more transparent or visible (Gillingham & Graham, 2016). As such, governments aim to create a transparent CWP system with regard to the client, the professional, service organisations and the wider society (Munro, 2004; Pollack, 2009; Hill & Shaw, 2011). In that context, Gillingham & Graham (2016) consider that the implementation of EISs in social work has made the daily work of practitioners 'visible in ways that social workers in the 1970s and much of the 1980s would find unimaginable' (p. 194).

However, this view has not gone unchallenged as research reveals that practitioners often develop strategies to handle the sometimes pernicious effects of these EISs, such as retaining paper files, minimising the time spent on EISs, leaving forms blank and filling out 'x' in obligatory fields (Broadhurst, Hall, Wastell, White, Pithouse, 2010; De Witte, Declercq, Hermans, 2015). As a result, the objectives and intentions of EISs in social work practice are often not realised and even undermined (Carrilio, 2005). This insight raises the question to what extent EISs are actually creating transparency and making social work practice visible. This paper, therefore, aims to address this question by identifying how the use of EIS in social work practice relates to the aim of

creating transparency. We will first provide contextual information about the ongoing debate on EISs, the drive for transparency and the current reform in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium). Afterwards, we will elaborate on our methodological framework before presenting our findings, which are based on semi-structured qualitative interviews with social practitioners. To conclude, we will discuss the implications of these findings for the development of transparency in social work.

EISs in social work: an ongoing debate

The drive for transparency

CWP has recently engaged in the enhanced introduction of EISs (Gillingham, 2013). This concept refers to a great diversity of tools that are used to record and process information, assess children's needs, provide direction for decision-making procedures, create a digital recording platform for casework and so on. Internationally, this development has led to the implementation of, for example, the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), a standard assessment tool to be used by all children's services in the United Kingdom, and the Integrated Children System (ICS), an information-sharing tool intended to help identify children at risk in England, or the Client Relationship Information System (CRIS), a client information and case management system for CWP services in Australia (White et al., 2009; Gillingham, 2011).

The widespread use of these systems illustrates that governments all over Europe have drawn (and are still drawing) upon a variety of EISs to support their aims within the field of CWP such as being more responsive to the needs of their clients, heighten accountability, assess the efficiency of social services and measure the results of social work interventions (e.g. Hudson, 2002; Parton, 2006; Aronson & Smith, 2009; Falconer et al., 2009). As mentioned, one of these aims also lies in the creation of a transparent social work practice with regard to the client, the social practitioner, child services and the public (Munro, 2004; Pollack, 2009; Hill & Shaw, 2011; Gillingham & Graham, 2015). Here, Gillingham & Graham (2016), followed by many others (e.g. Munro, 2004, 2011; Pollack, 2008) point out that social work has always been engaged in making everything at every level visible, but emphasise that the need for transparency for public social services such as CWP services has grown significantly over the last few decades.

Although it remains hard to exactly tackle what is meant by transparency, contemporary research provides us with some possible answers by fleshing out some of the rationales behind the increasing demand for transparency. According to many authors (e.g. Parton, 2006; Aronson & Smith, 2010; Wastell & White, 2014), one of the reasons lies in the prevalence of a more general neoliberal tendency in which social work has been operating for the last few decades. One important element of this neoliberal agenda is the use of managerial models stretching (i) the importance of performance measurements (Carrilio, 2005; Falconer et al., 2009; Aronson & Smith, 2010), (ii) financial discipline with the aim of cutting costs in public expenditure (Clarke & Newman, 1997) and (iii) the need to assess the efficiency of social work organisations to increase productivity (Clarke & Newman, 1997). In that vein, governments all over the world, including the Flemish government, are attempting to make social work more auditable, emphasising the need for individual practitioners and social services to be accountable for both their actions and their decisions to a multiplicity of stakeholders, including the public, government, colleagues and clients (Munro, 2004; Falconer et al., 2009; Gillingham & Graham, 2016). In other words, practitioners and services are required to show that they are acting properly and according to regulations. In doing so, they draw on EISs to make all activities visible as they depend on the data derived from EISs to create this accountability (Munro, 2004; 2011; Aronson & Smith, 2009; Gillingham & Graham, 2016).

Interconnected with this social and political context in which social work is operating, researchers (e.g. Parton, 1998; Scourfield & Welsh, 2003; Munro, 2004; Falconer & Rhodes, 2009; Broadhurst et al., 2010) point out to the preoccupation with risk management at the level of CWP services. According to them, this concern of preventing children from any harm and abuse is rooted in the public responses to tragedies such as Victoria Climbié and Baby P. in the United Kingdom (White et al., 2009) and Savanna as well as 'Maasmeisje' in the Netherlands. As a result of these cases and the public inquiry's following these cases, governments, media as well as the public are bound up with identifying, assessing and reducing the amount of risk for children (Munro, 2004), augmented by the belief that we are able to control our own environment and prevent ourselves and our children from any harm (Munro, 2004; Broadhurst et al., 2010). This explains why governments are keen to invest in practices of risk reduction, such as EISs since policy makers - expressing their beliefs through policy - seem to be convinced that the formalisation of practice through systems of risk management will make potentially dangerous situations visible and as such protect children from abuse,

mistreatment and confrontation with violence as practitioners will be able to intervene more quickly than before (Parton, 1998; Munro, 2004; Falconer et al., 2009; Broadhurst et al., 2010). In the US, this risk paradigm has even led to preventative programs were new parents are subjected to a systematic assessment – based on EISs - in order to decide whether the new-born child may be at risk. When this is the case, these so-called "high-risk parents" are offered weekly home visits in order to prevent any harm to the child (Falconer et al., 2009).

The logic of the database

Despite the widespread use of these systems, contemporary research has drawn attention to the challenges EISs might pose to both professionals and clients, not the least in relation to the creation of transparency (Aas, 2004; Parton, 2006; Aronson & Smith, 2010). For instance, researchers report that the attempt to formalise and standardise CWP practice through the use of preordained templates not only mainly supports managerial objectives (Aronson & Smith, 2010), but also leads to a process of decontextualisation by which clients are disconnected from their social and relational context, as important contextual information is often left out as these templates seldom provide additional space to give extra information (Parton, 2006; White et al., 2009; Hall et al., 2010; Bradt, Roose, Bouverne-DeBie, De Schryver, 2011). Consequently, a client's situation is split into a series of data elements, and this risks breaking up the holistic view of the client's life story (Aas, 2004). Consequently, the complexity of the client's situation is left out of the account (Bradt et al., 2011; Gillingham, 2015; Parton, 2006). This results in social work being based mainly on the logic of the database (Parton, 2006). This trend towards an increased emphasis on a database mentality (Aas, 2004; Parton, 2009) is disturbing because the information gathered by these databases is genuinely different from that gathered by narratives (Lash, 2002).

Child Welfare and Protection in Flanders

A brief overview

In relation to the development towards EISs, Flanders is a compelling case as it is currently undergoing a profound reform of the CWP system in which the use of EISs is considered pivotal to improving its quality. However, in contrast to England, the Netherlands and the US, in Flanders the development of EISs was not so much with a view to risk-management but the result of a fifteen-year political struggle to tackle a number of issues (Roets et al., 2014; Vanhee, 2014).

The first issue refers to the long-lasting problem of severe fragmentation of child services and striking gaps and overlaps in the provision of services, which led to an ineffective and inefficient use of resources (Roets et al., 2014; Vanhee, 2014). The Flemish government aim to solve this problem by generating data for evaluating, monitoring and optimising the work undertaken by social work professionals as well as for balancing care supply and care demand (Devlieghere, Bradt & Roose, 2016a, Vandeurzen, 2013; Vanhee, 2014). In that vein they are strongly aligning with the international managerial tendency as described above. The second issue relates to the increase in referrals resulting in long waiting lists for children in need of support (Roets et al., 2014; Vanhee, 2014). In order to tackle this problem, the Flemish government is counting on EISs to promote uniformity and create more structure. According to them, this will have a positive effect on the level of transparency, the dataflow and communication between professionals and organisations since the EISs are presented as standardised digital documents through which the social worker and the child are supposed not to 'invent' services but rather to choose from a catalogue of standardised services (Devlieghere et al., 2016a).

The third issue refers to the current public outcry for justifying why tax money should flow towards the CWP system. In order to cater this demand, the government relies on EISs to generate data by which CWP organisations can justify their requests for government funding and by which the government can justify their spending towards the public (Devlieghere et al., 2016a, Devlieghere, Bradt & Roose, 2016b). The last and most overarching issue lies in the creation of a more transparent CWP system. Not only in terms of making visible to the public what happens with tax money, but also in terms of making the whole CWP system more transparent for clients and practitioners. The relevance of this goal is illustrated by a Flemish policy maker stating that the current reform in Flanders and the use of EISs will lead to 'one clear and transparent procedure for all clients' (Vanhee, 2014, p. 188).

Intersectoral Gateway

As a result of these reasons, the Flemish government has invested in the renewal of already existing EISs as well as in the development of a new tool named INSISTO (Information System for the Intersectoral Gateway), which provides digital means for deciding which care is necessary (Vandeurzen, 2013; Vanhee, 2014). This is always an important decision to make, but especially in the context of Flanders as the current reform has not only enabled a significant reconstruction of the CWP system in Flanders by integrating the various

scattered services into one single organisational and conceptual framework, referred to as Integrated CWP, but also made a distinction between directly and non-directly accessible CWP. Directly accessible care is mainly non-residential care or short-term care, while non-directly accessible care mainly refers to long term non-residential care or residential care, including specialised types of care such as foster care..

While the former is directly accessible for young people and their parents, the latter is only accessible through an 'entrance ticket' which can be obtained in the Intersectoral Gateway (Vanhee, 2014). This gateway can be regarded as a public service that organises access to the indirectly accessible CWP services. It is comprised of two teams of social practitioners: the Needs Assessment Team (NAT) and the Youth Care Planning Team. When a social worker working in directly accessible care believes that a child is in need of specialised care, (s)he is obliged to submit an electronic standardised form, the Assistance Document (A-DOC). This document can only be submitted through INSISTO, which is an electronic environment in which social workers can open an A-DOC after login. The document itself consists of five components, including (i) identification of the client and his/her family where personal information can be written down; (ii) information about the needs of the child, the current living situation, former care that has been offered and the strengths and weaknesses of the child and his/her family; (iii) diagnostic information about possible mental and physical disabilities, including test results, (iv) extra information box where social workers can include discussions they had about the client with their team own members and lastly (v) a component where all actors need to formulate a proposal for appropriate care. In each component, several actors, such as the child, parents and other support persons as well as the social worker, can give their own opinion. Once the A-DOC has been completed, it is sent to the NAT. They will discuss and assess the content of the document and decide whether the requested help is necessary and appropriate. When this team believes important information is missing, it will contact the social worker who submitted the A-DOC and ask for clarification. This implies that there is no direct communication between the NAT and the child and the family, although the social worker who submitted the A-DOC can exceptionally request a meeting between the child and the NAT. Once this team have assessed the A-DOC, the child receives a Needs Assessment Report that indicates what kind of services are considered to be most suitable. Afterwards, the Youth Care Planning Team will figure out which CWP services are actually available to provide care and refer the child to a specific care provider.

Methodological framework

The data collection for this study took place in the five regional NAT's in Flanders. In relation to our study, the NAT is of pivotal importance as they are responsible for assessing the content of the A-DOC that needs to be submitted through the electronic INSISTO system in order to assign the appropriate non-directly accessible help. It is their task to work on a daily base with INSISTO and make sure that all requirements are met in order to meet the objectives of the EISs. In other words: they are in charge of the assessments and as such in the creation of a more transparent CWP system. In total, 17 professionals are employed to perform this task, varying from a diversity of backgrounds such as psychologists (n=5), criminologists (n=1), educators (n=3) and social workers (n=8). Although these professionals cannot be defined as frontline practitioners as they have no direct contact with clients, it is relevant to mention that they are still regarded as 'social' practitioners, as the Flemish government deliberately decided not to engage mere 'technicians', yet to install teams of social workers with extensive experience in frontline work with children and families.

After obtaining the approval of the Flemish Child Welfare and Protection Agency, we contacted the regional managers of the NAT. They provided us with the contact details of all employees for making individual appointments. All agreed to participate on the basis of a written informed consent in which they were also informed of their right to withdraw during the interview process. This right to withdraw was invoked by one participant as (s)he made clear that (s)he was not participating voluntarily but had been forced to do so by his/her supervisor. As a consequence, the informed consent could not be signed and the interview was not included as research data, although the participant insisted on talking to the researcher. In total, 16 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted between September and November 2015. During the interview, participants were assured that the collected data would be fully anonymised and the names of third parties and institutions excised. The study proposal was reviewed and approved in line with the University's research ethics guidelines. All interviews took place at the workplace of the participants and lasted for approximately one hour.

During the interview, we tried to gain insight into the day-to-day practice of the NAT. For each interview, the same semi-structured scheme was used (Mortelmans, 2007). As a result, the interview sought to balance thematic structure with sufficient room for the participants to elaborate on their own

perspectives (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Gill, Stewart, Treasure, Chadwick, 2008). With the participants' permission, all interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Afterwards, a critical reading and iterative coding process was initiated by the first author with the help of NVivo10 (Mortelmans, 2007), based on some codes drafted after a first reading of the interviews (e.g. information about participants, NAT rationales, positive and negative aspects of the NAT, coping strategies, importance of a team, tensions between theory and practice, tensions between official and personal views on care, and transparency). Data that could not be identified based on these codes were marked with a new code (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). At the same time, 15% of the transcripts were also independently analysed by the second and third authors to enhance the credibility of the data and findings. This allowed us to identify, interpret and reinterpret important topics, patterns and conceptual links throughout the analysis in a consistent and reliable manner.

In what follows, the main themes that emerged are presented and illustrated by excerpts from the transcripts of the interviews. The excerpts were translated from Dutch to English by the authors.

Findings

EISs as a base for transparency

During the interviews, all participants expressed positive views about the implementation of EISs. From their own perspective, they spoke extensively about the potential of EISs for increasing the level of transparency for clients and their own day-to-day practice as well as on more general, organisational and governmental levels. In what follows, we identified their thoughts and divided them into four dimensions.

A first domain revealed by our analysis captured the participants' opinion that an EIS is a main source of knowledge that assists the government in gaining better insight into contemporary developments and areas of concern, hereby following Scannapieco & Iannone (2014). According to these practitioners, this will lead to more transparency about what is going on within the CWP system. One participant even spoke of managing the long-lasting issue of waiting lists by 'gaining insight into what everyone is doing and as such seeing the difficulties in the CWP system'. (2)

A second, more organisational domain revealed the usefulness of INSISTO as an instrument for sharing reliable information between CWP services. In particular, the participants made it clear that by filling in all the text fields, they increased the level of transparency as CWP services now had the chance to get a better overview of the clients' areas of concern and strengths. At the same time, they also felt that the tool provided a unique opportunity to create a more uniform terminology, which structured the discussions between the several CWP services and quickly made visible what they were talking about. In that vein, some participants pointed out that the tool actually removed the noise and contemporary confusion about the use of very specific terminology peculiar to the domain of CWP:

> *The A-DOC can be a platform for exchanging information since its structure is well known by everyone in the field of CWP. This is important because every CWP organisation has its own way of reporting, which makes it difficult to understand each other. (8)*

A third domain revealed a number of benefits from a professional point of view. Here, participants described how EISs create ample opportunity to discuss the views and opinions of all actors involved in the care process. They felt that the broad scope of the tool helped to avoid 'tunnel vision', a metaphor used to express the practitioners' reluctance to consider alternatives, other than the practitioners preferred line of thought. In the words of one of the interviewees:

> *Well, a good tool is one in which several views and opinions from all actors involved can be discussed. One in which the parents and the minor can discuss their own point of view. But also where the view of the social worker submitting the A-DOC and that of the social worker(s) who previously worked with the client are encapsulated. In that way, you get a more nuanced viewpoint and not only that of one person. (14)*

Amongst the practitioners, there was also a key tenet that using a preordained tool would assist them in getting a bigger picture of the child's trajectory as information could not get lost in a paper file or misinterpreted. The practitioners also considered that this tool would increase transparency as they perceived it 'as a kind of record, a profile that travels along with the client when (s)he moves to another organisation. As such, information about the client is available for everyone involved.' (15) Furthermore, they believed that the tool would increase the level of uniformity/standardisation and in turn the level of transparency as it is now clear for everyone in the field of CWP on what knowledge base decisions have been made. As the following practitioner explained: 'Yes, it should be more transparent, because all the decisions,

although made by the several CWP services, are now extensively discussed.' (16)

Finally, our analysis also brought to light a fourth domain of transparency in which participants emphasised how EISs are beneficial for clients. Here, they stated that such tools increase the level of transparency within the care trajectory since the A-DOC can be filled in together with the client and other actors involved. Some practitioners described how this avoids the emergence of so-called hidden agendas in which professionals have an undisclosed plan. According to these practitioners, avoiding such hidden agendas increases the level of transparency: 'Matters of concern should be discussed openly and honestly. You can't work with families while there are things happening behind their back. Now you have to formulate all those things correctly.' (13) Some of the practitioners explicitly referred to the use of the A-DOC as an instrument for giving clients insight into what happened during their trajectory. Thanks to the preordained structure of the tool, these practitioners felt that they were able to reconstruct the clients' trajectory and make visible what happened during it:

> *Once, two girls, 18 and 20 years old, came back and asked if I would be so kind to grab their file and tell them their life story. I took their files and I was able to reconstruct their entire trajectory and explain what we discussed, when we discussed it, what decisions were made and especially why they were made. (15)*

Pitfalls

However, although many interviewees supported these claims, a persistent theme throughout the analysis was that simultaneously all – but one – participants also expressed concerns that shed light on the difficulty of using EISs as an instrument for increasing the level of transparency. In developing these concerns, some participants identified the process of establishing uniformity and standardisation as a major concern. They felt that this creates noise rather than removing it, hindering the proper sharing of information about the client. The fact that they have no direct communication with the client encouraged this feeling. In that vein, one practitioner, supported by others, expressed his/her concern and wondered whether the level of transparency in fact increased or decreased, since (s)he did not feel that s(h)e knew what was really going on in the client's life:

> *We have no direct contact with the client and his/her family. Sometimes, you can read between the lines, but you have no real feeling of what is going on like you have when you have a face-to-face conversation. (9)*

When further exploring these rationales, some of the practitioners pointed out that the linguistic structure of a database – such as an EIS – is genuinely different from the spoken word as a database is marked by its lack of narratives, closely following its own logic (Aas, 2004; Parton, 2006). According to the interviewees, this gradual acceptance of what Aas (2004) refers to as the ontology of the database is disturbing as 'it is hard to put two cases next to each other and say: that is exactly the same. Every case is different.' (6) They considered this development to be problematic and bound to bring a number of consequences. For instance, many described how a preordained tool made it almost impossible for them to capture important nuances and to present a complete overview of the client's life history as 'it is too fragmented and split into pieces'. (13) This makes it difficult for them to 'read between the lines' (9) and as such 'it is hard to present a complete and nuanced overview of what happened' (14), as there seems to be no beginning, middle or end. They are, in that vein, illustrating what Parton (2006) and Hall et al. (2010) refer to as a process of decontextualisation as a result of standardised tools.

Similarly, some of the participants pointed out that practitioners' ability to write consistently and convincingly has gained too much weight. Some of them even openly questioned whether what was written down actually gave an accurate and transparent overview of what was really going on in clients' lives. One of the participants said:

> *It is true that some social workers succeed in describing very thoroughly what we want to hear and read, or what they think we want to read, while another social worker is having difficulty in finding the right words and explaining the situation. (1)*

Here, some of the interviewees also pointed out that an EIS is in danger of become the 'single source of truth' (Peckover et al., 2008), as only information that has been submitted through the EIS is seen as relevant and transparent. During the interviews, several of the participants referred to one striking example illustrating the above:

> *We had a team meeting and there was a child that had already been admitted for several years into an organisation for children with a moderate mental disability. They did some new IQ test for the A-DOC and he was diagnosed with a minor mental disability. As a result, strictly speaking and following the rules, this child would no longer be admitted into the organisation for children with a moderate mental disability, although they had taken care of him for the last few years. Now, together with the psychiatrist, we wondered how he behaved in real life, what care he needed and what areas of concern he had. The psychiatrist responded*

> *that he belonged in the organisation for children with a moderate mental disability, so we gave him a moderate mental disability on paper. (15)*

Here, practitioners illustrated how the use of a preordained EIS almost prevented a child from receiving what they considered as appropriate care at that time. As a consequence, practitioners pointed out that their commitment to clients' needs and their expertise in assessment, as well as recognition of the need for an actual professional relationship with the client, encouraged them to use a strategy of overshooting in which they levelled up the 'objective' diagnosed areas of concern in order to assign help. They indicated that despite the requirement to collect detailed and preordained information, the recording and completion of the tool is somewhat sporadic and especially aimed at assigning help for the client, rather than collecting detailed and objectified information for policy purposes. By doing so, they exposed the difficulty and tension involved in the task of collecting information and creating transparency about contemporary developments and clients' trajectories within the CWP system when the designated tool's rigidity does not allow the specific needs of clients and the professional expertise of the practitioners involved to be borne in mind.

These tensions were reinforced during the interviews when participants described how they developed strategies of resistance, such as calling the social worker who submitted the A-DOC in order to gain a broader picture of what was really going on, or even turning a blind eye. In the words of one of the interviewees: 'When calling, you notice that you often receive another story than the one written on paper.' (3) As a result, the information gained on the telephone was not always submitted in the A-DOC, which in turn led to an incomplete and even non-transparent overview of the client's history and areas of concern. As such, the interviewees revealed that the aim of increasing transparency through preordained formats might even hinder the creation of transparency, as practitioners were reluctant to write everything down. This was, according to them, always in favour of the client, as the following interviewee illustrated:

> *From time to time, I've noticed that practitioners are struggling with their professional confidentiality. They find it hard to put some issues on paper because CWP services can read it afterwards. They have the feeling that not everything has to be written down, especially since some of those topics are very delicate. (7)*

The fact that participants refer to both the potential and pitfalls of EISs in realising transparency shows the complex struggle they are confronted with. We therefore, in what follows, elaborate on this complex struggle.

Discussion and concluding remarks

In this article, our particular concern has been the observation of Gillingham & Graham (2016, p. 194) that the implementation of EISs has made the daily work of practitioners 'visible in ways that social workers in the 1970s and much of the 1980s would find unimaginable'. At first sight, our findings seem to align with this observation as the practitioners in our study spoke positively about the potential of EISs for enhancing the level of transparency. From a policy-oriented perspective, they spoke of increasing transparency since the government now has the chance to gain a better insight into contemporary developments and areas of concern within the CPW system. From an organisation-oriented perspective, practitioners pointed out that they experience the sharing of client information between several CWP services as being more reliable, as they are now able to gain a better overview of the clients' areas of concern and strengths thanks to the structured and uniform language created by the EIS. From a professional-oriented perspective, practitioners stated that the INSISTO tool increases transparency as it allows the views of all actors involved to be discussed and as such creates a bigger picture of all decisions made, avoiding tunnel vision. From a client-oriented perspective, finally, practitioners argued that there is more transparency for clients since the EIS can be filled in together with the client. According to the participants, this inhibits the development of hidden agendas from practitioners towards clients and makes it possible for clients to reconstruct their entire care trajectory. In other words: during the interviews, practitioners indicated that they experience the use of EISs as a valuable instrument for creating transparency in several domains. As such, they seem to align with Gillingham and Graham's (2016) notion that the implementation of EISs has made the daily work of practitioners more visible than ever.

However, at the same time our findings also reveal how EISs has equally made the daily work of practitioners invisible in ways that social workers and governments in the 21st century would find unimaginable. For instance, all – but one – participants, who expressed positive thoughts, also raised concerns about, for example, the process of establishing uniformity and standardisation that occurs when using EISs. They indicated that this might even create more noise, instead of removing it as there is less and less space to write down the

client's life story as a narrative (Aas, 2004). According to them, this makes it difficult to capture the necessary nuances that help to create a transparent overview of the client's case trajectory. At the same time, these practitioners criticised the increased importance of the practitioners' ability to write down everything in a consistent and pre-structured way, especially since information that is not written down is not included in the EIS at all. In that vein, many of them indicated that the use of such a preordained tool might even hinder the process of assigning help for clients that seems appropriate according to these practitioners at the time of request, as illustrated in the case of the young boy with a minor mental disability. As a result, they were pressured into subordinating regulations and developing ways of pushing back at them while using EISs by devising strategies of resistance such as communicating by phone, turning a blind eye and even exaggerating clients' areas of concern in order to align with clients' needs. By doing so, the participants not only illustrate how the use of EISs in social work practice forces them to undertake actions which are not visible, but also point to the fundamental centrality of relationship-building in social work, recognising the importance of the interaction between a social worker and his/her client. Along those lines, the participants considered that EISs are instruments for taking action and deciding what help needs to be assigned, rather than instruments of understanding, not least since EIS only tend to make the output visible rather than what is happening during the process of assigning the appropriate help. We therefore agree with Munro (2004, p. 1079) that EISs seem to be about 'policing an organization's internal systems of control rather than making a direct examination of practice itself.' (Munro, 2004, p. 1079).

In short: our findings constitute evidence of a complex struggle in which practitioners show how EISs are on the one hand capable of increasing transparency from several perspectives (e.g. policy, professional and client), while hindering the creation of transparency from those same perspectives on the other hand. In doing so, the evidence highlights the complexity and strain embedded in using EISs to develop transparent social work, indicating how EISs can influence the creation of transparency in unhelpful and counterproductive ways. However, in concluding we do not argue that EISs are incapable of making certain actions visible, but rather that the notion that EISs in social work has made the daily work of practitioners 'visible in ways that social workers in the 1970s and much of the 1980s would find unimaginable' cannot be taken for granted, as currently seems to be the case (Gillingham & Graham, 2016, p. 194). At the same time, these findings should not be interpreted as a plea for more training of professionals in using EISs, as our

research shows that a lack of transparency does not stem from a failed implementation nor design of these systems, but in the very idea that transparency can be unambiguously increased by EISs.

Our findings offer new pathways for future research on this topic, such as analysing how a team of frontline social workers as well as their organisation handle the tensions described in our study. Furthermore, it also may be interesting to look beyond the discussion about EISs in social work and even raise more substantive issues about more systemic evolutions, such as the way social work is currently economically organised and reforms tend to follow this.

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CHAPTER 6

IN SEARCH OF RESPONSIVENESS

Abstract [1]

The informational context in which social work has been operating over the past decade has gained much more significance. In this context, Electronic Information Systems (EISs) are often implemented with the aim of being responsive to the needs of children and families. However, research has critically identified some major concerns with using EISs in ways that tend to reduce social work to a technical practice. As a result, practitioners and managers are using their discretion to shape and bend regulations precisely in order to achieve responsive social work practice. These strategies are often taken for granted and considered a good thing. In this paper, our aim is to capture the meaning of these strategies for the development of responsive social work. To do so, we interviewed social practitioners working with EISs on a daily basis. Our results show how practitioners use strategies to recreate the relational aspect of social work, thereby challenging the hypothesis that this was curtailed by the use of EISs. It is important to understand meaning of these strategies for the development of responsive social work as this development cannot be reduced to a mere relational practice as social work equally has to consider principles of justice, solidarity and equality.

1. Based on: Devlieghere, J. & Roose, R. (submitted). The Logic of the Database: in Search of Responsive Social Work. *Journal of Social Work*.

Introduction

Although Timms (1972, p. 1) points out that 'the history of recording in social work is as long as the history of modern social work', the informational context in which social work has been operating over the past decade has gained much more significance (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Bradt, Roose, Bouverne-De Bie, & De Schryver, 2011; Garrett, 2005; Hall, Parton, Peckover, & White, 2010; Hudson, 2002; Parrot & Madoc-Jones, 2008; Parton, 2009). It is in this context that the gathering, recording, collecting and sharing of information have come to dominate social work activities (Hall et al., 2010; Keymolen & Broeders, 2013; Parrot & Madoc-Jones, 2008; Parton, 2006, 2009; White, Wastell, Broadhurst, & Hall, 2010). In that vein, governments in, for instance, England (Mitchell & Sloper, 2008; Peckover, Hall, & White, 2009; White et al., 2010), Australia (Gillingham, 2009), the Netherlands (Lecluijze, 2015), the United States (Fluke, 1993) and Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) (Devlieghere, Bradt, & Roose, 2016; Munro, 2005) have rolled out a great diversity of so-called Electronic Information Systems (EISs), such as tools for digital recording, assessment, decision-making and electronic information sharing (Gillingham, 2013, 2014).

While many consider that EISs are capable of increasing the quality of social work by measuring the results of social work interventions (Van Yperen, 2013), enhancing efficiency (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008), stimulating a reflexive environment (De Meersman, 2010), creating more transparency (Aas, 2004; Aronson & Smith, 2009; Coleman & Harris, 2008) and being responsive to the needs of children and families (Harlow & Webb, 2003; Hill & Shaw, 2011; Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008; Van Yperen, 1996, 2013), recent research has convincingly demonstrated that this is not necessarily the case (e.g. Aas, 2004; Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Broadhurst, Hall, Wastell, White, & Pithouse, 2010; Broadhurst & Mason, 2012; Hall et al., 2010; Lecluijze, 2015; Manovich, 2001; Parton, 2006; White, Hall, & Peckover, 2009). In doing so, research has identified some major concerns in using EIS, such as the decontextualisation of practice (Aas, 2004; Hall et al., 2010), the curtailment of discretion (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Parton, 2006; Pithouse et al., 2012), and the evolution from a street-level towards a screen-level (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002) and even a tweet-level bureaucrat (Devlieghere et al., 2016), as well as the growing relevance of the logic of the database, which is considered to be genuinely different from the logic of the narrative (Parton, 2006).

In that vein, it could be argued that the use of EISs in day-to-day practice tends to reduce social work to a technical practice (Aronson & Smith, 2010; Tsui & Cheung, 2004), emphasising predictability and controllability rather than contributing to the development of a responsive practice. This is, however, not necessarily the case as several authors have demonstrated how practitioners, as well as (middle) managers, use their discretion to develop strategies to shape, reshape and even bend regulations and procedures for using EISs in social work practice, aiming precisely to achieve a responsive social work practice (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Evans, 2010; Evans, 2011, 2013; Evans & Hardy, 2010).

However, although contemporary literature often assumes that the use of such strategies in the face of EISs is by definition a good thing, the meaning of these strategies in relation to the development of responsive social work remains open to question. Our aim is therefore to examine this fascinating and still unexplored area of interest and empirically flesh out the meaning of these strategies in relation to the development of responsive social work. To do so, we draw data from qualitative interviews with social practitioners in the field of Child Welfare and Protection (CWP) in Flanders. Flanders is a compelling case in relation to this development as it has been subjected to a profound reform of the CWP system in which the use of EISs has become more pivotal than ever.

Electronic Information Systems

Over the last few years, governments worldwide have come up with numerous EISs to improve social work practice (Ames, 1999; Cleaver et al., 2008; Garrett, 2005; Gillingham, 2011; Harlow & Webb, 2003). This has, for instance, led to the use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and the Integrated Children System (ICS) in England, the National Reference Index for High Risk Youngsters in the Netherlands, the Client Relationship Information System (CRIS) in Australia and the Information System for the Intersectoral Gateway in Flanders (Devlieghere et al., 2016; Gillingham, 2011; Vanhee, 2014; White et al., 2009; White et al., 2010). These governments, often keen to invest in technology, argue that EISs are a 'tool for talk' (Garrett, 2005, p. 536), able to provide relevant insights about clients (Van Yperen, 2013) and assist practitioners in identifying the needs of children (Garrett, 2005), as such helping practitioners to better understand their practice (Mutschler & Hasenfeld, 1986). Such systems are expected to better capture what happened (Carrilio, 2005) and improve communication between a client and his/her practitioner (Harlow & Webb, 2003). In other words, the intention

of these governments is to use EISs to develop a social work practice that is responsive to the needs and concerns of children and their families.

However, as already argued, contemporary research provides us with numerous reasons why this aim is not necessarily achieved. First, the widespread deployment of EISs is interconnected with the increasingly dominance of the market-oriented era (Johansson, 2012) in which social work has been operating (e.g. Clarke & Newman, 1997; Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008; Tsui & Cheung, 2004; Wastell & White, 2014). This context, often referred to as managerialism or New Public Management (NPM), has been shaping the political and economic order to varying extents (Shanks, Lundström, & Wiklund, 2015). It includes a more bureaucratic regime in which the collection of data has become a key tenet. Consequently, data gathered by EISs are often used by governments to assess the efficacy and efficiency of social work organisations (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008; Tsui & Cheung, 2004), to monitor actions undertaken by professionals (Hill & Shaw, 2011; Jones, 2001; Peckover et al., 2009) and to measure the results of social work interventions (Van Yperen, 2013), hoping to govern the CWP system in a more manageable and predictable way than before (Evans & Harris, 2004; Johansson, 2012; Parton, 2006).

Secondly, the design of these tools implies a process of pre-structuring, as EISs are often exist out of several preordained restricted boxes. As such, important information on the client's social and relational context is missing as data which do not fit into the templates is left out and there is seldom additional space to capture extra information (Aas, 2004; Hall et al., 2010; Hill & Shaw, 2011; Parton, 2006; White et al., 2010). Consequently, the clients' situation is split into a series of elements, which must afterwards be brought together again. A process of decontextualisation thus emerges by which clients, figuratively speaking, are disconnected from their social and relational contexts (Aas, 2004; Hall et al., 2010; White et al., 2010). This in turn leads to the fading out of the narrative as the logic of the database is genuinely different from that of the spoken word (Lash, 2002; Parton, 2008). According to Specht and Courtney (1994), this is disturbing as a central task of social work is precisely to be attentive to the broader social and relational context.

Thirdly, research on the use of EISs not only raises questions about (the lack of) privacy (Garrett, 2003), but also indicates how governments often use EIS-generated data as a resource for social control. It is in that sense that Parton (2008), supported by many authors, refers to the emergence of the 'preventive

surveillance state', since EISs are considered valuable instruments for the early detection of children who are potentially at risk and who are considered to be troublesome since they deviate from societal standards (Garrett, 2004; Parton, 2008).

Lastly, research on frontline social work illuminates how practitioners are being reduced to technicians due to the growing importance of EISs (Aronson & Smith, 2010; Broadhurst et al., 2010; Coleman & Harris, 2008). As technicians, their discretion is being curtailed (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Parton, 2006; Pithouse et al., 2012) and they evolve from a street-level (Lipsky, 1980) towards a screen-level bureaucrat, spending most of their time in front of a computer screen following the logic of the database (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002). In our view, such a screen-level bureaucrat could even be called a tweet-level bureaucrat, as s/he has to fill in all kinds of preordained and text-limited boxes (Devlieghere et al., 2016).

Hence, several authors (e.g. Aronson & Smith, 2010; Bradt et al., 2011; Parton, 2008; Tsui & Cheung, 2004; Webb, 2006) argue that the central focus is on manageability and predictability, rather than on the development of responsive social work. In that vein, one could argue that the use of EISs actually inhibits the development of responsive social work, as they seem to reduce social work to a more technical practice (Aronson & Smith, 2010; Tsui & Cheung, 2004).

The presence of discretion

This is, however, not necessarily the case due to the 'continuing (and inevitable) level of discretion front-line staff continue to exercise despite management reforms in public services' (Evans, 2015, p. 1). As such, the development of EISs is also 'opening up new areas in which discretion can operate' (Hill & Shaw, 2011, p. 86). In that regard, numerous authors (e.g. Aronson & Smith, 2009; Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Carrilio, 2008; Evans & Harris, 2004; Evans, 2011, 2015; Huuskonen & Vakkari, 2013) have illustrated how practitioners and (middle) managers use their discretion to shape, evade, bend and even reject governmental directives while using EISs. In doing so, they use EISs in ways unintended by their designers and advocates by creating strategies of resistance such as retaining paper files (De Witte, Declercq, & Hermans, 2015; White et al., 2009), recording in a decision-making tool after a decision has already been made (Gillingham, 2009) and entering an 'x' in obligatory fields (De Witte et al., 2015). According to Aronson and Smith (2009), these workarounds are often developed in refusing to comply with procedural and

governmental guidelines when practitioners believe that they go against their own commitments towards clients and may not even 'serve the social' (Aronson & Smith, 2009, p. 540). In doing so, practitioners use workarounds to move back and forth between governmental directives (e.g. striving for efficiency) on the one hand and their day-to-day search for a responsive practice (e.g. respecting the individuality of clients) on the other.

However, as already argued in the introduction, the meaning of these strategies for the development of a responsive social work practice, as well as the relationship between the two, remains open to question. Our intention is therefore to flesh out this meaning empirically and in doing so, stimulate debate on the topic. In what follows, we will present our methodological framework, followed by our findings.

Methodological framework

Context

The data collection took place in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium). Flanders has recently been subjected to a major reform of its CWP system in which the use of EISs became more pivotal than ever before. This reform took place in 2013 and reconstructed the CWP system by integrating the various child and welfare services into a single organisational and conceptual framework, referred to as Integrated CWP. A pivotal element in the reform is the distinction made between directly and indirectly accessible CWP. While the former is directly accessible for young people and their parents, the latter is only accessible through the so-called intersectoral gateway (Vanhee, 2014).

This intersectoral gateway organises access to the indirectly accessible CWP services, including long-term and specialised types of care such as residential care, psychiatric care and foster families. When a social worker in the broad field of CWP believes that a child is in need of such specialised care, (s)he is obliged to submit a standardised electronic form, the Assistance Document (A-DOC). This document can only be submitted through an EIS named INSISTO (Information System for the Intersectoral Gateway) and jointly with the child that is in need of help. The A-DOC consists of many components for capturing, for instance, personal information as well as information about the needs of the child, the current living situation and the strengths and weaknesses of the child and their environment. There is also a component which provides

diagnostic information about possible mental and physical disabilities, including test results. In each component, several actors, such as the child, parents and other support persons, as well as the social worker, can give their own opinion. Once the A-DOC has been completed, it ends up with an independent Needs Assessment Team (NAT), which is part of the Flemish Government. The NAT will discuss and assess the content of the A-DOC and decide whether the requested help is necessary and appropriate. When the NAT believes important information is missing, it will contact the social worker who first submitted the A-DOC. This implies that there is no communication between the NAT and the child, although the social worker who submitted the A-DOC can, exceptionally, request a meeting between the child and the NAT. Once it has have assessed the A-DOC, the child receives a Needs Assessment Report that indicates what kind of services are considered to be most suitable. Afterwards, a Youth Care Planning Team will figure out which CWP services are actually available to provide care and send the A-DOC to those services.

In Flanders, five regional NATs' are responsible for assessing the content of the A-DOC in order to assign the appropriate indirectly accessible help. In total, 17 professionals, all trained psychologists, educators or social workers, are employed to perform this task. The research and data collection took place in these five NATs.

Design and data collection

The study employed qualitative methods of data gathering through semi-structured interviews with all 17 professionals of the NATs, which took place between September and November 2015. The interviews were conducted under conditions of confidentiality and anonymity, with all participants being assured that the collected data would be fully anonymised and the names of third parties and institutions excised. All agreed to participate on the basis of a written informed consent in which they were also informed of their right to withdraw during the interview process. This right to withdraw was invoked by one participant, who made clear that (s)he was not participating voluntarily. As a consequence, the informed consent could not be signed and the interview was not included as research data, although the participant insisted on talking to the researcher. In total, 16 interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim and included as data material.

During the interviews, we attempted to gain insight into the day-to-day practice of the NATs, using the same semi-structured interview scheme for each

interview (Mortelmans, 2007). As such, we sought to balance thematic structure with sufficient room for the participants to elaborate on their own perspectives (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). Afterwards, a critical reading and iterative coding process was initiated by the first author with the help of NVivo10 (Mortelmans, 2007), based on some codes drafted after a first reading of the interviews (e.g. information about participants, NAT rationales, positive and negative aspects of the NAT, coping and strategies, importance of a team, tensions between theory and practice, tensions between official and personal views on care, and transparency). Data that could not be identified based on these codes were marked with a new code (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). At the same time, 15% of the transcripts were also independently analysed by two other senior researchers to enhance the credibility of the data and findings. This allowed us to identify, interpret and reinterpret important topics, patterns and conceptual links throughout the analysis in a consistent and reliable manner. The study proposal was also reviewed and approved in line with the University's research ethics guidelines. All interviews took place at the workplace of the participants and lasted for approximately one hour.

In what follows, the main themes that emerged are presented and illustrated by excerpts from the transcripts of the interviews. The excerpts were translated from Dutch to English by the authors.

Findings

From their specific position as social practitioners in the regional Needs Assessment Teams, our study participants have witnessed the profound penetration of EISs into their day-to-day practice. The findings presented here focus upon this penetration and more particularly on how the practitioners exercise their discretion to develop strategies in handling EISs that aimed to be responsive to the needs of children and their families. During the interviews, participants provided us with several examples of such strategies. Some of them are not necessarily new and actually align with and strengthen previous research (e.g. Broadhurst et al., 2010; De Witte et al., 2015). We nevertheless elaborate on each of these strategies below in order to discuss their meaning for the development of a responsive social work practice.

A first strategy that came to the fore was telephoning the social worker who admitted the A-DOC. Participants gave many reasons for doing so, but overall, most of them agreed with their colleague who stated:

> *When I pick up the phone, I receive another story than the one provided on paper. The background as well as the context of the clients' situation is much more outlined and you are able to ask some questions. (Respondent 3)*

By doing so, the participants attempted to acquire a more comprehensive and at the same time nuanced picture of the clients' situation and areas of concern than the one provided on paper, noting regretfully that children's needs were more than ever defined in terms alienated from the clients' life world. In that vein, one interviewee noted that (s)he 'was very happy to hear that a psychiatrist told them "you cannot make judgements based on reports. That is extremely delicate." And that is delicate indeed, because you cannot put the finesse of a person on paper, despite all the available tools.' (Respondent 11)

A second strategy employed by our participants involved the improper use of certain text fields. Here, some participants encouraged fellow practitioners to use certain pre-structured components of the A-DOC for unintended purposes so as to provide its reader with more information than anticipated. One of the participants explained:

> *Lately, we have been telling people to write down information about the duration of the clients' problems and the background of, for instance, the father, brother and sister in the component where the diagnostic tests results should be implemented. (Respondent 13)*

This resonates with the use of discretion to search for space within a preordained system to provide the necessary contextual and relational information about the clients' specific situation, knowing that this space was not initially foreseen. The use of this strategy actually creates the opportunity to expand, rather than narrow, the social (see Aronson & Smith, 2009), despite the preordained format of the EIS.

A third common strategy used by practitioners in handling EISs was to turn a blind eye when noticing that some required information was missing or written down in the wrong place. One participant stated that 'not everything has to be written down in the A-DOC' (Respondent 9) and another indicated that 'it is not that important where information is written down' (Respondent 2). In this process, some practitioners tended to fill in some variables by themselves, based on the information they had gathered from the rest of the EIS. Asked when and how they determined whether or not to turn a blind eye, practitioners often looked at the gravity and precariousness of the client's situation. When this was unstable, they often ignored the missing information because they did not want to make things worse by asking for more detailed information, which could

trigger an unnecessary emotional reaction. In the words of one interviewee: 'We are trying to balance between what is really necessary and what we can condone' (Respondent 17).

A fourth and last strategy that came up during the interviews refers to the concept of overshooting. Here, practitioners levelled up the 'objective' diagnosed areas of concern in order to be responsive to the needs of a particular client and assign the help that they considered appropriate at the time. During the conversations with our participants, several illustrated the concept of overshooting with the following striking example:

> *There was a child that had already been admitted for several years into an institution for children with a moderate mental disability. They did some new IQ test for the A-DOC and (s)he was diagnosed with a minor mental disability. As a result, strictly speaking and following the rules, this child was no longer allowed to be admitted into the institution for children with a moderate mental disability, although they had taken care of him/her for the last few years. Now, together with the psychiatrist, we wondered how (s)he behaved in real life, what care (s)he needed and what areas of concern (s)he had. The psychiatrist responded that (s)he belonged in the institution for children with a moderate mental disability, so we classified this client with a moderate mental disability on paper. (Respondent 15)*

Asked about the reasons for developing such a profound strategy, participants spoke extensively about their commitment towards clients and their aim of being responsive to the needs and concerns of children and their families. In this particular example, they felt that the structure of the EIS prevented the client from receiving the appropriate care, a situation which actually forced them to develop and use a strategy of overshooting.

In the end, our findings exposed how practitioners develop strategies for dealing with some of the pernicious effects of EISs, aiming to be responsive to the needs and concerns of their clients. When trying to flesh out the underlying rationales for doing so, our study participants expressed strongly felt concerns about the lack of direct communication between them, the client and the social worker who admitted the A-DOC. One participant expressed this tension very clearly:

> *I believe we are working with real people. We are not employees of the tax services. Following procedures would not bring us one step closer and to be honest, I think some people would not get the help they need. (Respondent 2)*

The practitioners' commitment to clients' needs and their expertise in assessment, as well as their recognition of the need for a real professional relationship with the client, encouraged them to develop and use a wide variety of strategies. They were convinced that these strategies were necessary to be responsive to the needs and concerns of the child and their family because the EIS tool's rigidity did not allow the specific needs of clients and the professional expertise of the practitioners involved to be engaged. This resulted in the strongly argued perception amongst these practitioners that 'you cannot standardise something that takes place between and amongst people'. (Respondent 9)

Discussion and concluding remarks

The research presented here took place in the context of a recent but ubiquitous development towards the use of EISs in social work practice. Reiterating a point we made earlier, this development is not uncontested as research (e.g. Aas, 2004; Broadhurst, Hall, Wastell, White, & Pithouse, 2010; Garrett, 2005; Parton, 2006) has brought to light many pernicious effects of these systems on the services delivered by social work organisations and their professionals. In that regard, it been argued that the use of EISs tends to reduce social work to a technical practice, hindering practitioners from being responsive to the needs of their clients. For this reason, practitioners develop strategies that attempt to resist the negative effects of EISs, precisely with that aim in view. It was our intention to gain insight into the meaning of these strategies for the development of a responsive social work practice, as this was still an unexplored area of research. We therefore focused on the strategies used by practitioners in the regional NATs in Flanders as they are at the very heart of this development.

In this process, our results revealed how practitioners develop strategies to resist processes of decontextualisation by contacting the social worker who submitted the initial A-DOC to gain more information about the clients' lifeworld and his/her context. Our results also illustrated how practitioners aim to create a narrative base by using certain preordained text fields in unintended ways to provide the reader of the A-DOC with a consistent and comprehensive story about the clients' current situation and their request for help. In the same vein, these findings equally show how practitioners resist the logic of the database by using a strategy of overshooting. This was strikingly illustrated in the case of the child with the minor disability. This example illustrated how, although the current rhetoric of proceduralisation, rationalisation and objectification almost

prevented him/her from receiving assistance, it was the use of the strategy of overshooting that ensured that this child received appropriate care.

As such, the current rhetoric about the reduction of social work to a mere technical practice by the use of EISs needs to be nuanced. On the contrary, given these examples, together with those provided in the findings section, we would argue that these strategies actually lead to the development of responsive social work as the use of these strategies is aimed at being responsive to the needs and concerns of the clients and their families. This was especially the case because, when asked about their reasons for developing the strategies, the practitioners in our study spoke of a lack of direct communication, as well as the absence of a professional relationship, with the client and the social worker who admitted the A-DOC. They believed that the relational aspect of social work was curtailed by the use of EISs and that the strategies employed would recreate this relationship, based on their intense commitment towards the client and his/her family.

Incidentally, this seems to be true, but – of critical relevance to this discussion – such a position would also reduce responsive social work to a mere relational practice. Conversely, we argue that social work research and practice need to take the notion of responsive social work further than its relational aspect. Historically, social work is positioned in a constant struggle, 'experiencing the difficulties inherent in exercising both compassion and control, and mediating between the state and the individual' (Postle, 2002, p. 339). This is not only the case for social work in general, but also for practitioners in exercising their social work mandate. In interacting with clients and intervening in children's lives, they also 'need to simultaneously consider the rights and aspirations of the individual citizen' on the one hand 'and collective welfare, solidarity and equality in a democratic society' (Roose, Roets, & Bouverne-De Bie, 2012, p. 1593) on the other. According to Bar-On (2002), dealing with this struggle is a matter of professional power and that is precisely the point here.

The strategies and professional power used by the practitioners in our study stems from personal engagement with and closeness to each child in need of assistance. In this sense, the practitioners try to achieve what is right for that particular client, time and context. Their commitment to their clients and the prospect that EISs might hinder it has motivated them to use strategies such as overshooting and the unintended use of certain preordained text fields in the A-DOC. They are, in other words, using these strategies to consider the needs and aspirations of the individual client with whom they are engaged at that

moment. These practices might be considered worthwhile, but what is worrying at the same time is that the strategies employed tend to reduce responsive social work to a predominantly relational practice. Questions such as 'what is the consequence of this decision for the current balance between care supply and care demand' or 'why does this person need this specific kind of care, knowing that many others are waiting' seem to be left out while considering whether a particular client needs help. This is remarkable, because, in general, practitioners often indicate that one of the advantages of EISs is precisely to consider and reconsider the necessity of the requested care (Devlieghere, Bradt & Roose, 2016). And although practitioners acknowledge the importance of principles such as solidarity and equality, the needs of the individual client and their commitment to this client seem to prevail in the end. This inevitably leads to the conclusion that the broader social-political principles and questions that are typical in social work (Lorenz, 2007, 2008) are excluded from the practitioners' actions.

It is precisely this point that encourages us to be cautious in debating responsive social work simply at the relational level, and in arguing on this basis that the strategies used by the practitioners contribute to the curtailment or continuation of responsive social work. More specifically, responsive social work cannot be reduced to a relational practice as it also 'entails a more general orientation to the role and responsibilities of the profession as a whole in contemporary societies' (Kessl, 2014, p. 308). It is an inherent task for social work and social work practitioners to find a balance between personal engagements on the one hand and equality, embodied in every child's right to assistance, on the other (Banks, 2013; White & Tronto, 2004).

Notwithstanding this critique, it should be noted here that the task of balancing between 'the public' (equality and solidarity) and 'the private' (the needs of individual clients) is a complex struggle with no clear-cut solution (Roose et al., 2012). The answer lies in remaining attentive and sensitive to the complexity of social work, navigating a path between extremes. It is therefore not our aim to blame these practitioners in any way. At heart is the issue that our findings have illustrated how the current rhetoric, in which the use of workaround strategies is seen as something self-evidently positive that will contribute to the development of responsive social work, is not necessarily correct. This is not because practitioners are using such strategies incorrectly or because they have bad intentions, but because an orientation towards responsive social work entails more than being responsive to the specific and individual needs of a child and their family. It requires an orientation in which both individual and

more general societal aspirations, such as equality, are balanced and not perceived as antagonistic.

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CHAPTER 7

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Introduction

The overall objective of this doctoral dissertation was to contribute to the knowledge of and knowledge base for a responsive social work practice in the context of Electronic Information Systems (EISs). The aim of this study arose from the observation that social work was - and still is – confronted with the introduction of a wide diversity of EISs (Carrilio, 2005; Cleaver et al., 2008; Falconer, Rhodes, Mena, & Reid, 2009; Garrett, 2005; Gillingham, 2011, 2015; Hill & Shaw, 2011; Keymolen & Broeders, 2013; Mitchell & Sloper, 2008; Munro, 2005; Parrot & Madoc-Jones, 2008; White, Hall, & Peckover, 2009; White, Wastell, Broadhurst, & Hall, 2010). These systems are considered to be important instruments for creating data that serve as a knowledge base for making policy and for making organisational and frontline decisions (Aronson & Smith, 2010; Hall, Parton, Peckover, & White, 2010; Jones, 2001; Parton, 2000). Indeed, scholars have argued that EISs can further develop and improve social work as they are capable of increasing its quality of social work by assisting practitioners and social services in being responsive to the needs of children and their families (De Meersman, 2010; Harlow & Webb, 2003; Hill & Shaw, 2011; Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008; Van Yperen, 1996, 2013). At the same time, research at the frontline level has illustrated how the use of EISs might also impede such a development as they tend to create a technical social work practice (e.g. Aas, 2004; Bradt, Roose, Bouverne-De Bie, & De Schryver, 2011; Broadhurst, Hall, Wastell, White, & Pithouse, 2010; Garrett, 2005; Lecluijze, 2015; Munro, 2004; Parton, 2006). However, on this matter, scholars have repeatedly shown that social services and frontline staff use their discretion to deal with the policy and the demands of management, as well as to resist the potential reduction of their daily work to a merely technical operation by have finding ways of dealing with perceived negative effects (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; De Witte, Declercq, & Hermans, 2015; Evans & Harris, 2004; Evans, 2011, 2015; Huuskonen & Vakkari, 2013).

This seemingly blurred contradiction encouraged us to put a research agenda in place 'to map the changes which are occurring and to examine what is happening 'on the ground' to social work' (Garrett, 2005, p. 542). We argued that this research agenda should focus on the relationship between the development of responsive social work in a context where EISs are considered pivotal to its achievement. This research agenda was threefold in capturing the domains of policy, management and practice, as the knowledge gaps we identified in the introduction occurred in all three domains. In this process, we

touched upon several key elements introduced and discussed in chapter one, including the current rationales for implementing EISs, their aim of creating transparency and enhancing accountability, the role of managers within this debate and the strategies used by social practitioners to bend and reshape EISs while using them on a daily basis.

The research was carried out in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) as the Flemish CWP system was subjected to major reform in 2014 where the use of EISs became more pivotal than ever before. The Flemish government created an intersectoral gateway that organises access to indirectly accessible CWP services for more severe cases by deciding who is eligible for which kind service. In order to access the intersectoral gateway, an electronic standardised form, called the Assistance Document (A-DOC) needs to be submitted. This is an electronic application form that can only be submitted through an EIS named INSISTO (Information System for the Intersectoral Gateway). This is an electronic environment in which social workers can open an A-DOC after login. As a result of this intersectoral gateway and the central role of INSISTO and the A-DOC within it, the Flemish CWP system was perfectly suited as a research context for this study (Flemish Government, 2014; Vanhee, 2014).

This final chapter integrates the main findings of our study in order to formulate a concise and coherent answer to the overall research question from which meaningful points of discussion and reflection can grow. To begin with, the main findings of the study are discussed and we formulate answers to the main research questions. We thereby also clarify how the research contributes to current theoretical and empirical discussions in social work. We then position our research results in the current debate about the development of responsive social work in a context of EISs. Subsequently, the implications of our study for social work and social work practice are being discussed. We conclude by outlining some suggestions for further research as we hope that this research will also stimulate others to unfold research activities on this topic.

Central conclusions

In the following, we present a summary of the central conclusions of our study by answering the research question we outlined in chapter one. Our aim is to provide a concise but thorough overview of the research findings and their meaning for the development of responsive social work.

Policy rationales for implementing EISs

In order to gain an empirical understanding of the governmental rationales for implementing EISs in day-to-day social work practice, we examined a variety of policy documents that were relevant for the topic of EISs and CWP in Flanders. We explained our understanding that a lack of clearly defined rationales is an important part of the current misunderstandings and antagonistic debate. We therefore considered a deepening of governmental rationales to be important since the current debate about EISs is often dominated by rather abstract policy discourses, rather than empirically sound and clearly identified rationales. In fleshing out these rationales, we identified how – in this case – the Flemish government installed EISs on the assumption that they would balance supply and demand, account for the public cost of CWP and create uniformity across all CWP organisations and their practitioners. Just to be clear, it was our aim not only to identify the governmental rationales for implementing EISs, but also in light of the development towards a responsive social work practice, to discuss the meaning of these rationales for that development. It is precisely in this discussion that two major issues of concern rapidly came to the fore.

A first major issue of concern related to the rationales of balancing supply and demand and creating a more uniform CWP practice, both capable of being achieved by the use of EISs. In our view, both these rationales are illustrations of a government that is bound up with efficiency. At first sight, there is nothing wrong with efficiency since everyone and especially public bodies are eager not to waste any funding. However, in light of a responsive social work practice, increasing efficiency by balancing supply and demand is worrying as this constitutes a practice in which the received care and support is not established through negotiations between clients and social services that also take into account the complexity of the client's life story (Roets, Dean, & De Bie, 2014). On the contrary, our view is that in the logic of matching supply and demand, the care and support that a young person receives greatly depends on the social services that are available at the time of the request. In the end, every client who is not referred to the right services represents an inefficient use of resources. In so doing, this logic aligns with managerial tendencies that limit the meaning of responsiveness to efficiency (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Tsui & Cheung, 2004). Furthermore, we argued that increasing efficiency by promoting uniformity and creating a common language by using EISs is based on the idea that EISs will ensure that all professionals do the same thing in the same circumstances (White et al., 2009). This idea ignores the fact 'that

professionals have their own ontologies' (White et al., 2009, p. 1213) and that the pursuit of uniformity implies a form of pre-structuring and predictability that reduces social work to a technical practice (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Tsui & Cheung, 2004), instead of stimulating a responsive social work practice. This effect arises not least since responsive social work is characterised by attempting to connect with the complex fabric of clients' lives by not only taking the client's context into account, but also using the same language as the client uses (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009), rather than using a uniform language based on the logic of a database.

A second major issue we identified in the analysis was the governmental rationale of enhancing accountability through the use of EISs. This rationale is problematic for the development of a responsive social work practice. Our analysis shows that EISs were implemented to ensure public accountability for the cost of CWP in terms of effects, based on the belief that a more effective CWP practice produces a more economically accountable means of practice (Webb, 2001). As Pols (2005) has already argued, such a logic does not necessarily align with what clients and professionals describe as criteria for good care. In the end, efficiency cannot be the primary yardstick for professional accountability (Webb, 2001) and especially not in relation to responsive social work as the search for appropriate help is embedded in the relationship between the professional and the client (Oostrik, 2010; Parton & O'Bryne, 2000).

This led us to conclude that although the governmental rationales provide us with more insights into the reasons why governments are implementing EISs, they also tend to impede the development towards responsive social work. This is not because the practical implementation of these tools might undermine the ambitions of their designers (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Carrilio, 2005; Gillingham, 2013) or because professionals use them in an unintended way (De Witte et al., 2015), but because the underlying governmental rationales for developing and promoting EISs – matching supply and demand, pursuing uniformity and creating accountability – are flawed from the outset.

The ambiguous nature of policy makers

After identifying these policy rationales, we looked for more in-depth explanations and rationales for implementing EISs from policy makers at first hand. It was Bogdan and Biklen (1998) who inspired us to follow this path, arguing that documents, and especially policy documents tend to be rather

vague. Evans and Harris (2004) pursued this theme, arguing that 'the intended content of any document (what the authors mean) is not necessarily the same as its received content (what the document's "audience" reads)' (Evans & Harris, 2004, p. 886). We therefore interviewed key policy actors in the field of CWP in Flanders and sought to discern their motives, views and discourses underlying the development of EISs in the first place, as well as their meaning for responsive social work.

In this study, the policy makers revealed the complex struggle to articulate consistent reasons for the implementation of EISs. They referred to a variety of rationales - administrative (speed up the care process by transferring information more quickly and replacing paperwork), policy (better match supply and demand, and generate and collect information on developments in the field of CWP), care (increase client participation, reduce risks and monitor professionals' actions) and economic (increase efficiency, avoid unnecessary investments, allocate subsidies, monitor costs and strenghten financial accountability) rationales. The attentive reader will already have noticed that these rationales actually confirm the findings of our first study. This does not necessarily come as a surprise since the policy makers interviewed in this study were also responsible for the preliminary groundwork when implementing social policy in practice.

What was surprising in this study, though, was that these same policy makers not only sought to legitimise the use of EISs by illustrating their importance, but also expressed serious concerns about the idea of developing a more responsive CWP practice through their use. In so doing, they expressed concerns about the idea of using EISs to reduce the amount of risk in CWP or to pre-structure and even rationalise or objectify social work practice. They stated that social work primarily remains a therapeutic and dialectical practice. They also raised questions concerning the usefulness of EISs and the way they should be used. Subsequently, they expressed hope that practitioners would move back and forth between governmental demands on the one hand and the day-to-day realities in which they are immersed on the other in order to establish a responsive social work practice.

This developing discourse of ambiguity was present throughout the interviews and we argued that it throws a different light on the tension between regulation and policy making on the one hand and the position and role of social work and social workers on the other. We think that this discourse may create opportunities for social work to act as a force for social transformation,

especially since it is possible to perceive the government not as a monolithic entity, but rather as an area of diversity and ambiguity which is formulating its own strategies for developing responsive social work, together, although in a different way, with social work practice.

Managers and their professional values

Investigating the role of social service managers in the governmental imperative for using EISs in their organisation, as well as their views and discourses concerning the use of EISs to demonstrate accountability, was one of the central research aims of this dissertation. In so doing, we shed new light on how managers steer and shape this governmental imperative, rather than being mere executors of policy. We explained that managers share the widespread view that they need to be held accountable for their actions by other services, the government and society. However, in this chapter we also went beyond these taken-for-granted assumptions as several topics emerged during the interviews that forced us to revisit our current (theoretical) understanding of the manager's role in achieving accountability through EISs.

At first, the managers involved in our study saw clear benefits in using EISs to assist them in creating accountability. In so arguing, they mostly referred to the ability of EISs to stimulate critical reflection on the need for the requested care, which they linked with demonstrating accountability for requesting expensive care for severe cases. Remarkably, though, this seeming consensus rather quickly cleared the way for managers to express some serious concerns with using EISs to heighten accountability. They were particularly worried that the current demand for accountability was fully encapsulated in what we refer to as the logic of the database and that as a result the nature of accountability had become bureaucratic (Burton & van den Broek, 2009). In that vein, they argued that they only seemed to be held accountable for what was being monitored by the EISs, causing a reduction of 'reality' to nothing other than the one produced by the outcomes of EISs. Managers actually felt constrained by EISs and in response, they developed a variety of strategies or stimulated their practitioners to develop strategies for bending, reshaping or even ignoring current procedures concerning the use of EISs. In so doing, managers (allowed practitioners to) exaggerate the clients' problems, rephrase certain concerns or even create parallel circuits by contacting colleagues before admitting the A-DOC.

Based on these findings, we concluded that this illustrated that managers of social services (in Flanders) cannot be regarded merely as bureaucratic executives of government policy and play an important role within the current debate about EISs, especially since the strategies they used stem from their commitment to their practitioners and to clients in need of help. We consider that this resonates with managers pleading for a more reflexive approach to accountability as they believe that being accountable for one's actions is a matter of being constantly reflexive about the current situation and the actions that are perceived as most appropriate for resolving it at the time, as well as bringing their decisions into dialogue, rather than as a matter of EIS outcomes.

Creating workarounds at the front door

In the last study, we interviewed social practitioners who are at the front door of the assessment and referral team that decides who is eligible for indirectly accessible care. The aim of this study was actually twofold. On the one hand, we sought to examine how social practitioners handle the governmental imperative towards EISs in their social work practice and especially their views and discourses concerning the creation of transparency through the use of EISs. On the other hand, we also aimed to identify the meaning of the strategies they used in evading and bending government procedures concerning the use of EISs with the aim of developing responsive social work. The former research question was discussed in chapter five, the latter in chapter six.

We kicked off this study by identifying some opportunities for using EISs to create transparency and make the daily work of practitioners 'visible in ways that social workers in the 1970s and much of the 1980s would find unimaginable' (Gillingham & Graham, 2016, p. 194). These opportunities encapsulated chances to increase transparency from a policy-oriented perspective (gain insight into developments and areas of concern), an organisation-oriented perspective (sharing client information became more reliable), a professional-oriented perspective (allows the views of all actors involved to be discussed, avoiding a tunnel vision) and a client-oriented perspective (EIS forms can be filled in together with the client). These opportunities made clear that the social practitioners in our study considered EISs to be valuable instruments for creating transparency in a variety of domains.

Of critical relevance here, however, is also that the social practitioners made it clear that EISs had equally rendered the daily work of practitioners invisible.

They illustrated this view by identifying a number of pitfalls, pointing out, for instance, that an EIS makes it hard to capture the essential nuances that actually help to create a transparent overview of the client's case trajectory. As a result, they felt pressured into subordinating regulations and developing ways of pushing back at them while using EISs by devising strategies of resistance such as communicating by phone, turning a blind eye and even exaggerating clients' areas of concern in order to align with clients' needs. By doing so, these practitioners illustrated how the use of EISs in social work practice was forcing them to undertake actions which were not visible at all.

As we sought to understand the meaning of these strategies for the development of responsive social work, we examined them more closely in the second part of this study. In this process, practitioners provided us with ample examples of how they develop strategies to resist processes of, for example, decontextualisation. They explained how, for example, they attempted to maintain a narrative base and resist the logic of the database by using a strategy of overshooting. Based on these strategies, we argued that the current rhetoric about the reduction of social work to a mere technical practice through the use of EISs needs to be nuanced. Ultimately, the strategies used by practitioners are aimed at being responsive to the needs and concerns of the clients and their families. However, we pinpointed that it is exactly here that a new problem arises. When fleshing out the reasons why social practitioners develop strategies of resistance, we noticed that the strategies they were using were particularly focused on building a professional relationship with the client. We argued that this might reduce the development of a responsive social work practice to a mere relational practice. We therefore strongly emphasised the need to develop a perspective on responsive social work that also aims at finding a balance between personal engagements and equality, embodied in every child's right to assistance (Banks, 2013; White & Tronto, 2004). In interacting with clients and intervening in children's lives, social practitioners also 'need to simultaneously consider the rights and aspirations of the individual citizen and collective welfare, solidarity and equality in a democratic society' (Roose, Roets, & Bouverne-De Bie, 2012, p. 1593). We recognise that this is not an easy task and consider that the answer lies in remaining attentive and sensitive to the complexity of social work.

We concluded, though, by pointing out that the current rhetoric, in which the use of strategies is seen as something self-evidently positive that will contribute to the development of a more responsive social work, is not necessarily correct as an orientation towards responsive social work entails more than being

responsive to the specific and individual needs of a child and its family. We argued that it requires an orientation in which both individual and more general societal aspirations, such as equality, are balanced, and neither is excluded.

Where the shoe pinches

In what follows, we aim to tease out some of the puzzles that were uncovered during the research and that have occupied social work for the last few years and discuss its consequences for the current state of affairs in social work theory and practice. Our primary concern is to think about what constitutes responsive social work in a context of EISs. To date, many contemporary social work educators, researchers and practitioners have been critical of the movement towards EISs, pointing to some of the pernicious effects of EISs on social work frontline practice and the services provided for children and their families who are in need of help, while emphasising the need for a narrative, relational social work practice at the same time (Aas, 2004; Bradt et al., 2011; Broadhurst et al., 2010; Garrett, 2005; Gillingham, 2009, 2016; White et al., 2009). It has accordingly become commonplace to criticise the use of EISs in general and especially the governments that have implemented them. Although we highly value these voices and take their given critique seriously, it was from the beginning our aim to go beyond this often dichotomous debate. In what follows, we will examine some of the assumptions and familiar notions that are taken for granted in the current debate about EISs. In so doing, we would like to emphasise that although the research was carried out in the specific context of Flanders, we strongly believe that our arguments are also applicable to other countries as well as to social work in general as similar developments are occurring outside CWP as well.

Social work as a minefield

Taking a step back in examining our own research results, we consider that the current social work context, and in this particular case the field of CWP in Flanders is a minefield: from the perspective of the outsider, everything might seem calm and easy-going. Ultimately, the most recent reforms have made efforts to catch up on the matter of digitalisation and the seemingly endless possibilities of ICT within social work by implementing a wide variety of EISs across the world. These EISs can assist practitioners and social services in assessing every client's situation and making decisions about who is or is not eligible for care, providing a fast and easy accessible environment for recording

client information in real time (Carrilio, 2005; Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008). Meanwhile, this 'new' way of communicating also has the potential to redesign and strengthen interactions between families and practitioners by providing new means of participation (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008). As our interviews with managers and social practitioners have shown, the EISs also stimulate practitioners to think more carefully about the client's strengths and concerns, to discuss thoroughly the opinions of all actors involved, to get a bigger picture of the client's situation and to share information with other colleagues and services in a more reliable way. Furthermore, the policy makers who were interviewed for our study argued that the data that are gathered by the EISs also provide an overview of the current situation in the CWP system by uncovering its ongoing evolutions. It is their belief that based on this information, they can create and implement policy that should also increase efficiency, accountability and transparency in the CWP system as a whole (e.g. Gillingham & Graham, 2015, 2016; Hudson, 2002; Parton, 2006; Pollack, 2009).

However, when taking a closer look and entering the field of social work as we did in this research, it rapidly emerges that this field is not so easy-going as it may seem at first sight. On the contrary, it is littered with traps and explosive areas and it goes without saying that the traps and explosive areas we identified are all related to the development of responsive social work in a context of EISs. To begin with, it comes as no surprise that policy makers, managers and social practitioners are expressing their worries about electronic and technical failures, as well as the increased amount of time they need to spend behind their computers for purposes they consider not necessarily inherent to the nature of social work. There is sufficient research to show that social workers have found the introduction of EISs to be at best distracting and at worst frustrating and deeply unhelpful. Furthermore, it is true that the EISs are experienced as less than user-friendly by those using them. And although we recognise that these irksome teething problems are at least annoying and counterproductive, the problems that surfaced during this research are much more severe and profound. In what follows, we will identify these problems and discuss them one by one.

Illusions and disillusions

A first main issue here is that, as our research has illustrated, the widespread implementation of EISs across social services is seemingly embedded in a sphere of illusions. As this might be perceived as a rather bold statement, we

believe that a little more explanation may be helpful. We investigated the meaning of EISs for increasing transparency. There, social practitioners made clear that they experienced some advantages in using EISs in their social work practice and in relation to the creation of transparency. We recognise these advantages and welcome them, but in our view, they do not outweigh the evidence practitioners provided us with in showing how EISs have made the daily work of practitioners invisible in ways that social workers and governments in the 21st century would find unimaginable. It could be argued that this derives from the underutilisation of these systems and that the practitioners need to be trained to use them properly (Carrilio, 2008; De Witte, 2017). However, this is not the case at all here. The issue that arises again and again is that the practitioners told us how they felt forced to go underground, as the logic of the database did not allow them to align with their professional values when trying to help their clients. Taking this into account, we consider that the use of EISs to make visible what 'happens on the ground' seems to be an illusion as many actions actually disappear from the surface.

The same is true for heightening accountability through EISs. Managers of socials services in Flanders indicated that they agreed with the currently mounting demand for accountability. However, they expressed their deepest concerns about the fact that this demand is limited to what is encapsulated in the logic of the database, which results in a bureaucratic form of accountability where they are only held accountable for what is being monitored by the EISs. This paradoxical situation, in which managers are more than ever expected to monitor their actions to be held accountable but 'surveillance is directed at the paperwork attached to the work, not at the intricacies of their actual practice with people' (Munro, 2004, p. 1093), leads to a situation in which managers even encouraging their practitioners to develop workaround strategies. As a result, it seems to be an illusion that EISs are heightening accountability, as many of the actions performed by practitioners and managers are not captured by the EISs and they are both held accountable only for what is encapsulated in the EISs. Again, it could be argued that this is a plea for more and better training of the professionals who are responsible for using these systems or even for the expansion of the features of EISs, but this is not the case at all. On the contrary, here we align with the managers who pleaded for a more reflexive approach to accountability as it is our and their understanding that being accountable for one's actions is a matter of being constantly reflexive about the current situation and the actions that are perceived as most appropriate for resolving it at that particular time, as well as bringing one's decisions into dialogue.

In short, based on the findings of our study, we are strongly convinced that the idea that EISs will create more transparency and heighten accountability is an illusion. The question remains, though, why these systems are widespread and highly valued amongst governments worldwide. Here, several scholars provide us with a piece of the puzzle. As EISs are building upon the potentials of ICT and databases, they are encapsulated in a realm of objectivity and technical-rationality, since they are capable of standardising and regulating practice by providing practitioners with a uniform structure of pre-ordained text fields and tick boxes to gather data about what they are doing (Baines, 2010; Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Carrilio, 2008). As such, they limit the room for human error (Broadhurst et al., 2010), which is regarded as highly important in a context where governments are bound up with risk-reduction (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Falconer et al., 2009; Munro, 2004; Parton, 1998; Scourfield & Welsh, 2003). These systems are therefore considered to be neutral instruments that will assist practitioners and managers in their daily work since these individuals are not neutral. As Evans and Hardy (2017, p. 6) argue: 'the decisions that practitioners make are best understood as practical judgements emerging from processes of practical reasoning, […] that are made in particular settings by particular people'. EISs are considered to eliminate these practical judgements and replace them with rational judgements.

It is precisely here that a third illusion comes to the fore. This regime of truth that is imposed by implementing so-called neutral, objective and rational EISs in social work practice is not neutral at all. These EISs are not just machines assisting practitioners and managers to do their job. The rationales for implementing these systems that were uncovered, show that EISs are artefacts of the expanding context of bureaucratisation and risk-reduction. They align with managerial rationales (Lecluijze, 2015) and this is troubling because managerial and professional rationales seem to be strongly contrasting logics. While a managerial logic focuses on 'the means by which a production plan can be realised', a professional logic puts emphasis on 'commitments to a set of values and a body of knowledge which requires them [practitioners] sometimes to step outside their role as employees to be true to their professional commitments' (Evans & Hardy, 2017, p. 2).

The problem, however, lies not only in the contrasting logics and the fact that the rationales for installing EISs are not neutral. It also lies in the idea, or should we say illusion, that social work should or could be value-neutral, objective and rational. As we have already stressed, social work is positioned in a constant struggle, 'experiencing the difficulties inherent in exercising both

compassion and control, and mediating between the state and the individual' (Postle, 2002, p. 339). This leads to an ambiguous position in which practitioners need to support clients on the individual level 'while at the same time keep open the discussion on the structural nature of problems' (Roose et al., 2012, p. 1594). This ambiguous and uncertain character is not only part of the nature of social work (Bouverne-De Bie, 2015; Parton, 1998; Roose et al., 2012). It is also in balancing this ambiguous position that practitioners and managers 'have no option but to make decisions and act as though their choices are objective, knowing full well that the knowledge upon which they are based is often contested and so their judgements and decisions may be "wrong"' (Evans & Hardy, 2010, p. 175). This is why we argue that the rationales for implementing EISs in social work tend to impede the development of a responsive social work practice. In the end, creating uniformity, matching supply and demand by pre-structuring practice and increasing efficiency are rationales that derive from the idea that social work practice can be structured in a technical-rational way.

Embracing ambiguity

It is clear that the governmental rationales for implementing EISs we identified are attempting to fade out this ambiguous character. When trying to create a more uniform language and streamlining how practitioners should assess specific cases by implementing a pre-structured EIS, one is attempting to create more equality and objectivity. Again, there seems to be nothing wrong with this at first sight, but considering the ambiguous nature of social work, this is not true. It is not possible to resolve the ambiguity in social work and one should not try to do so, as it is an important and abiding characteristic of social work (Bouverne-De Bie, 2015; Parton, 1998; Roose et al., 2012). This is not only an academic opinion. During the interviews with policy makers, they explicitly pointed to this ambiguous character when expressing hope that practitioners would move back and forth between the governmental procedures for using EISs on the one hand and the professional values they feel strongly about in the day-to-day practice on the other. In expressing this hope, the policy makers, we contend, recognised and valued the ambiguous character of social work. We have already argued that this opens up new perspectives for establishing a dialogue between policy makers, managers and practitioners.

However, although there is an open path to dialogue and although policy makers seem to value the ambiguous character of social work, there is an underlying problem that is quite severe: the EISs do not allow this ambiguity.

EISs are pre-structured and as we have already stressed several times, embedded in a technical-rational way of thinking that does not allow ambiguity. This is why policy makers, managers and practitioners indicated that one of the problems with these new electronic methods for steering social work practice is that they are embedded in the logic of the database and that this logic is genuinely different from a professional social work logic. This explains why the story of all participants in our research, ranging from policy makers to managers and social practitioners, is ambiguous in itself. All see advantages in using EISs in their social work practice, all want to make use of new electronic methods and all are in favour of creating a transparent social work practice where all actors are held accountable for their actions. In the process of interviewing our participants, no one expressed negative views or opinions about creating transparency or heightening accountability. The problem is, however that governments are making use of EISs to achieve these outcomes, while EISs do not allow deviation from procedures and regulations, which is necessary and inevitable in social work considering its ambiguous nature.

It is therefore our contention that if one wants to recognise social work's ambiguous character, one needs to acknowledge that social workers need the space to be flexible and even to be allowed to disobey governmental imperatives from time to time, as this is the only way for them to engage in an ambiguous, uncertain, complex and non-linear field like social work (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004; McBeath & Webb, 2002; Roose et al., 2012). In other words, they need to be able to deviate from the preordained and strict procedures that are part of EISs and this is precisely the point here. In a context where EISs steer, shape, bend and organise their practice, social practitioners and managers are not able to deviate. They are seemingly forced to follow governmental and, as we have shown, managerial imperatives. The result is that practitioners and even managers go underground in developing strategies of resistance so they can deviate from the EIS procedures in order to embrace the ambiguous nature of social work and navigate between paths of extremes. However, by going underground it becomes impossible to create more transparency, as what happens on the ground is no longer visible. In turn, it also becomes impossible to be held accountable for what happens on the ground. This vicious circle leads to a development that is miles away from a responsive social work practice. It is our contention that in order to develop responsive social work, a first step is to recognise and embrace its ambiguous. This has, however, become increasingly difficult owing to the use of EISs in social work practice.

Managers as facilitators

Notwithstanding this difficulty, we argue that, based on our findings, managers of social services can play an important role in embracing this ambiguous position. Of course, there are subtleties and nuances of meaning throughout the different perspectives of policy makers, managers and social practitioners when talking about increasing transparency, heightening accountability and using EISs to do so. This even may be an explanation of why there is so much resistance to and distrust of the use of EISs in social work. We have, for instance, shown that policy makers, managers and social practitioners have different interpretations of what transparency and accountability should be, about to whom they should be held accountable and about what should be made transparent and for whom. This lack of coherence and reconciliation between all parties involved is a source of mutual misunderstanding that inevitably leads to frustrations. However, at the end of the ride, it is remarkable that everyone involved in this study has only one aim, namely helping a particular client in a particular situation at a particular time. Although this seems to be self-evident, it is not. For a long time, we took for granted that the interests of clients, social workers, managers and governments did not coincide. Hence, we even considered managers to be 'a homogeneous group, committed to the implementation of organisational policy' (Lipsky, 1980 in Evans, 2011, p. 371). Although this might perhaps still be true to some extent and in some cases, our research has demonstrated that managers also align with professional rather than managerial values. We therefore argue that from their specific position as managers and mediating between frontline practice and governmental policy, they are a pre-eminent actor in creating an organisational climate where the ambiguous nature of social work can be embraced, but also in conveying the need for ambiguity towards other stakeholders, such as policy makers, and to society as a whole.

In our research, from time to time we got wind of social practitioners expressing how they had not shared some of their actions with their managers or even covered them up because they are not in line with the procedures that were supposed to be followed when deciding who was eligible for care. When we asked these practitioners why they felt the need to go underground, they argued that they were afraid that their managers would not understand the position into which they had been forced. This was a position in which they were asked to navigate between engaging with the personal needs of a client on the one hand and doing what they are expected to do in following regulations on the other. In our view, these examples show how important the role of

managers can be and should be. Our contention is that they fully need to capture, recognise and embrace the tension and ambiguity in which practitioners are sometimes placed. When they fail to do so, practitioners go underground, not making visible what they do. When they, on the contrary, succeed in doing so, and there are many examples of managers recognising this tension, practitioners can discuss their concerns and managers can, in turn, discuss these concerns with their supervisors, funding bodies and other governmental agencies. Ultimately, the development of a responsive social work practice also entails a dialogue concerning the tensions that arise when balancing between principles such as equality and objectivity and engagement with the needs of the individual service user. This dialogue should not be exclusive to the field of frontline social work, but should be held at all levels, including the governmental, organisational and frontline levels.

In search of responsive social work

This leads us back to our central research question, wondering how the development of a responsive social work practice can be achieved in a context of EISs. Based on our findings and the interviews we undertook with policy makers, managers and social practitioners, it is fair to say that such a development cannot be achieved when EISs are considered to be doing the job. In short: the development of a responsive social work practice implies establishing a strong professional relationship between the service user and the social worker in which the actions performed by the social worker are made transparent and negotiable in a dialogue with the service user through which the social worker becomes accountable for their actions. At the same time, this development also entails a more general orientation towards the ambiguous nature of social work in which practitioners and managers need to balance between the individual needs of a client and his/her family on the one hand, and more broader principles such as equality on the other. Such development cannot be made through EISs since these systems (i) do not make visible what happens on the ground, (ii) do not assist managers and practitioners in creating a reflexive approach to accountability and (iii) ignore the ambiguous nature of social work.

There are several possible paths towards a solution that could be followed in trying to resolve this problem. One lies in an ethnographic approach in which ICT developers spend time in social work services to become more acquainted with the day-to-day work of social practitioners (Hill & Shaw, 2011). Based on the studies we undertook, this would not solve the issue. The problem does not

lay so much in the development of EISs, the design of the tools or the (lack of) training of those using them. We have argued extensively that the logic behind the implementation of EISs is troubling and impeding a development towards responsive social work.

An alternative and clear-cut solution would be to get rid of all these systems. Although such view of point might seem to be in line of thought with the central tenet of the general discussion, this is not entirely the case. We argue that such a fatalistic point of view would not only tend to leave social work (practice) expressionless, it would most of all ignore research that has illustrated how important it can be for service users to have access to their own case files and data that explains why they were service users in the first place. For instance, in her research De Wilde (2015) illustrated how detailed case files of orphans in the city of Ghent enabled them to (re-)construct parts of their identity many decades after they had left the orphanage. By having recorded their trajectory and accessing their own case files, these people were able to solve some pieces of the puzzle and find out, for instance, why they were placed in an orphanage in the first place. This research showed abundantly how important it could be to retain a track record of the decisions that are made in a child's trajectory. We are therefore very reluctant to argue that EISs have no place in social work whatsoever, although we do want to point out that there is a difference between the EIS we focused on and a case record file as referred to in the case of the orphanages. We also would like to emphasise that research, such as that of De Wilde (2015) does not open any doors for EISs to be implemented with the aim of developing a responsive social work.

We therefore argue together with Hill & Shaw (2011) that if we want to recognise the endless limits and pitfalls related to EISs as well as the importance of, for instance keeping a track record of service users, a practice-led approach could provide us with a possible middle ground. In such a practice-led approach, the first question is how the advantages of an EIS can be brought to social work. Such an approach takes into account the consequences of EISs for social work and does not force these systems into practice in ways that is inappropriate and changes the tasks of social work themselves, regardless of whether or not they improve practice. Such a practice-led approach begins with questioning what social work needs to improve its practice and to achieve a responsive social work practice. Based on our research, this could imply that pre-ordained text fields are considered interesting as they stimulate practitioners to think and re-think the life situation of a service user. However, it would also imply that EISs cannot serve as a tool for accountability or

transparency. The main advantage of such a practice-led approach, however is that it opens up a dialogue between those who use EISs on a daily base and those who decide whether or not they will be implemented.

This strongly contrasts with the current technology-led approach in which advocates of EISs begin by questioning ICT developers what features they can design, which are afterwards implemented in social work practice. In other words: it is our contention that common ground can be found on some aspects of EISs but that this is only possible through an open dialogue, which can be achieved by using a practice-led approach.

The need for further research

Our research addressed important unquestioned and taken-for-granted notions and assumptions about some of the contemporary developments in social work. We have contributed to the theoretical understanding of the development of responsive social work in a context of EISs, to insights related to the use of EISs in social work practice and to the theoretical underpinning of the creation of transparency and accountability in social work in general and CWP in particular. Nevertheless, we also argue that scientific knowledge should be continuously subjected to revision in order to deepen the existing knowledge as well as to search for vigorous answers to problems that have been uncovered as a result of research in the field. Based on our research, we are therefore strongly convinced that important research areas lie ahead and that there are several pathways that need to be followed in the (near) future. These pathways should not only deepen our own research or expand the context in which the research took place. It is necessary that they also seek to assess the nature of the changes we touched upon in this dissertation and expand our scientific knowledge of them by formulating answers to the minefields issues we identified earlier.

First of all, we are struck by the fact that the managers in our study advocated a more reflexive approach to accountability. If we want to gain insight into how the development towards responsive social work can be stimulated in the context of EISs, it is therefore highly necessary to map how managers and social services attempt to create an alternative reflexive approach to accountability and how they negotiate with their funding bodies and governments to create a space where this reflexive accountability can be put in place. Research that focuses on these questions can provide us with insights concerning the leverages that allow social services to develop alternatives that deviate from the contemporary managerial and economic logics that are

omnipresent and shape social work in general. This is crucial since social work research, educators and practitioners have been extensively criticised this managerial context and searched for ways in which social work can maintain its identity and nature, which is under pressure due in the current managerial context. Of importance herein is that research on the level of policy, organisations and practice becomes intertwined, as the questions that arise are multilayered and cannot easily be researched separately. It is in the relationships between all these actors that new insights will come to the fore and contribute to the development of responsive social work in a broad managerial context. However, further research should not stop there as the minefields we identified also entail a more general orientation towards contemporary movements in social work. Our research has focused on the development of responsive social work in a context of EISs. We studied this research question in a context where EISs are omnipresent. In so doing, we have demonstrated that they are artefacts of a managerial rhetoric and economic logic that has gained ground in social work. We therefore consider it critical to look beyond the discussion about EISs in social work and raise more substantive issues about systemic evolutions, such as the current preoccupation with managerial means. As reforms within several social work areas, such as CWP and early childhood education and care, tend to follow this economic logic, we argue that research should focus not only on how social work operates within such a context, but also on how it could operate outside that context or create alternative ways of dealing with it. Empirically breaking these boundaries would broaden our view and provide us with insights into social work's central characteristics, but also with empirical knowledge that maps how managerial influences can be approached and handled from a management and frontline perspectives.

Second, throughout the diversity of studies we undertook, we involved policy makers, managers and professionals in an active way, as they were important research participants. To date, however, few or no empirical studies have included clients as active research participants when questioning the use of EISs in social work practice. Empirically, though, this is a lacuna and we therefore need to revisit the client's perspective. Important research questions to be posed here include whether and how clients experience working with EISs in order to gain access to social care services, as well as what meaning EISs have for their care trajectory. These questions include topics such as transparency and accountability, as it is important to flesh out how clients and their families experience the use of EISs in creating transparency and heightening accountability. Ultimately, advocates of EISs often argue that they are

implemented to increase the quality of social work in terms of being more responsive to the needs of a client and his/her family. In that vein, questions concerning the participatory character of social work should be included as it is argued that EISs also contribute to the level of participation as it is argued that clients are now more than ever directly involved in, for instance, assessing their case as well as in creating a detailed overview of their trajectory, areas of concern and strengths.

Third and last, future research could make a great advancement by focusing on the governmental level. We have already taken up this challenge by focusing on the governmental rationales for implementing EISs and on the views and motives of key policy actors. However, as we already argued the generalisability of our findings to other countries concerning the ambiguous situation policy makers are situated in is unclear. Given this limitation, we need to carry out similar studies in other countries where the movement towards EISs is ongoing. There are without any doubt many opportunities to do so as the development of EISs is still omnipresent around the world. Therefore, rather than taking assumptions about policy and policy makers for granted, these studies would strengthen and expand our current empirical insights into the views, motives, discourses and rationales of policy actors and governmental agencies that are at the heart of the policy making process and the practice-oriented implementation of EISs. Gaining a better understanding of these discourses would, in turn, create endless opportunities for social work and governmental agencies to commence a dialogue about their concerns and rationales and go beyond the sometimes hostile and antagonistic current debate. In line with this thought, our study has also enabled us to map how managers of social services have been aligning with the professional values of social work as they also encouraged their social practitioners to use their discretion when they felt that the EISs hindered them from being responsive to the needs of their clients. As we have already indicated, the question remains whether this is only the case in Flanders as in the Flemish context managers are often professionals who have succeeded in climbing up the ladder based on their previous experience with clients at the frontline level, and are now in executive positions. Therefore, it is our belief that further research could strengthen and deepen our understanding of how managers of social services in other countries position themselves in relation to this on-going development.

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APPENDIX I

DATA STORAGE FACT SHEETS

Data Storage Fact Sheet (no.1)

Name/identifier study

Author: Jochen Devlieghere

Date: 10 januari 2017

1. Contact details

==========

1a. Main researcher

- name: Jochen Devlieghere
- address: Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Gent
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1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)

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If a response is not received when using the above contact details, please send an email to data.pp@ugent.be or contact Data Management, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.

2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet applies

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* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are reported: Devlieghere, J., Bradt, L., & Roose, R. (2016). Governmental rationales for installing electronic information systems: a quest for responsive social work. SOCIAL POLICY & ADMINISTRATION.

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3. Information about the files that have been stored

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3a. Raw data

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* Have the raw data been stored by the main researcher? [X] YES / [ ] NO

If NO, please justify:

* On which platform are the raw data stored?

- [X] researcher PC

- [X] research group file server

- [ ] other (specify): ...

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- [X] main researcher

- [X] responsible ZAP (as the data is stored on the research group file server, the data is available for both the main researcher and its supervisor)

- [ ] all members of the research group

- [ ] all members of UGent

- [ ] other (specify): ...

3b. Other files

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* Which other files have been stored?

- [X] file(s) describing the transition from raw data to reported results. Specify: This can be found in the methodology section of the article.

- [X] file(s) containing processed data. Specify: One Nvivo 10 file that contains the processed data of the policy documents, including the coding tree.

- [X] file(s) containing analyses. Specify: See findings section in the article. Also, a file with the preliminary results is also available on my PC as well as on the research group file server, in Dutch.

- [X] files(s) containing information about informed consent: Specify: A blank copy of the informed consent is saved on my PC. Also, all signed informed consent were scanned and are on my pc, as well as on the research group file server, in Dutch.

- [X] a file specifying legal and ethical provisions. Specify: The documents that were submitted to the Ethical Commission are on my PC and I have a paper letter with the approval of the Ethical Commission.

- [X] file(s) that describe the content of the stored files and how this content should be interpreted. Specify: One Microsoft Word document contains an overview of all the raw data that was collected.

- [ ] other files. Specify: ...

* On which platform are these other files stored?

- [X] individual PC

- [X] research group file server

- [ ] other: ...

* Who has direct access to these other files (i.e., without intervention of another person)?

- [X] main researcher

- [X] responsible ZAP

- [ ] all members of the research group

- [ ] all members of UGent

- [ ] other (specify): ...

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Data Storage Fact Sheet (no.2)

Name/identifier study

Author: Jochen Devlieghere

Date: 10 januari 2017

1. Contact details

==========

1a. Main researcher

- name: Jochen Devlieghere

- address: Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Gent

- e-mail: jochen.devlieghere@ugent.be

1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)

- name: Prof. dr. Rudi Roose

- address: Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Gent

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If a response is not received when using the above contact details, please send an email to data.pp@ugent.be or contact Data Management, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.

2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet applies

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* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are reported: Devlieghere, J., Bradt, L., & Roose, R. (2016). Policy rationales for electronic information systems: an area of ambiguity. BRITISH JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WORK.

* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply to?: The sheet applies to all the data used in the publication

3. Information about the files that have been stored

==========
=

3a. Raw data

---

* Have the raw data been stored by the main researcher? [X] YES / [ ] NO

If NO, please justify:

* On which platform are the raw data stored?

- [X] researcher PC

- [X] research group file server

- [ ] other (specify): ...

* Who has direct access to the raw data (i.e., without intervention of another person)?

- [X] main researcher

- [X] responsible ZAP (as the data is stored on the research group file server, the data is available for both the main researcher and its supervisor)

- [ ] all members of the research group

- [ ] all members of UGent

- [ ] other (specify): ...

3b. Other files

---

* Which other files have been stored?

- [X] file(s) describing the transition from raw data to reported results. Specify: This can be found in the methodology section of the article.

- [X] file(s) containing processed data. Specify: One Nvivo 10 file that contains the processed data of the policy documents, including the coding tree.

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- [X] research group file server

- [ ] other: ...

* Who has direct access to these other files (i.e., without intervention of another person)?

- [X] main researcher

- [X] responsible ZAP

- [ ] all members of the research group

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Data Storage Fact Sheet (no.3)

Name/identifier study

Author: Jochen Devlieghere

Date: 10 januari 2017

1. Contact details

==========

1a. Main researcher

- name: Jochen Devlieghere

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- e-mail: jochen.devlieghere@ugent.be

1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)

- name: Prof. dr. Rudi Roose

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If a response is not received when using the above contact details, please send an email to data.pp@ugent.be or contact Data Management, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.

2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet applies

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* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are reported: Devlieghere, J., Bradt, L., & Roose, R. (submitted). The Mounting Claim of Accountability Through Electronic Information Systems: A Managers' Perspective. BRITISH JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WORK.

* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply to?: The sheet applies to all the data used in the publication

3. Information about the files that have been stored

==========
=

3a. Raw data

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* Have the raw data been stored by the main researcher? [X] YES / [ ] NO

If NO, please justify:

* On which platform are the raw data stored?

- [X] researcher PC

- [X] research group file server

- [ ] other (specify): ...

* Who has direct access to the raw data (i.e., without intervention of another person)?

- [X] main researcher

- [X] responsible ZAP (as the data is stored on the research group file server, the data is available for both the main researcher and its supervisor)

- [ ] all members of the research group

- [ ] all members of UGent

- [ ] other (specify): ...

3b. Other files

---

* Which other files have been stored?

- [X] file(s) describing the transition from raw data to reported results. Specify: This can be found in the methodology section of the article.

- [X] file(s) containing processed data. Specify: One Nvivo 10 file that contains the processed data of the policy documents, including the coding tree.

- [X] file(s) containing analyses. Specify: See findings section in the article. Also, a file with the preliminary results is also available on my PC as well as on the research group file server, in Dutch.

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- [X] research group file server

- [ ] other: ...

* Who has direct access to these other files (i.e., without intervention of another person)?

- [X] main researcher

- [X] responsible ZAP

- [ ] all members of the research group

- [ ] all members of UGent

- [ ] other (specify): ...

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Data Storage Fact Sheet (no.4)

Name/identifier study

Author: Jochen Devlieghere

Date: 10 januari 2017

1. Contact details

==========

1a. Main researcher

- name: Jochen Devlieghere
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- e-mail: jochen.devlieghere@ugent.be

1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)

- name: Prof. dr. Rudi Roose
- address: Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Gent
- e-mail: rudi.roose@ugent.be

If a response is not received when using the above contact details, please send an email to data.pp@ugent.be or contact Data Management, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.

2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet applies

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* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are reported:

(1) Devlieghere, J., Bradt, L., & Roose, R. (2017). Creating Transparency through Electronic Information Systems: Opportunities and Pitfalls. BRITISH JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WORK.

(2) Devlieghere, J., & Roose, R. (submitted). The Logic of the Database: In Search of Responsive Social Work. JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WORK.

* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply to?: The sheet applies to all the data used in the publication

3. Information about the files that have been stored

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=

3a. Raw data

---

* Have the raw data been stored by the main researcher? [X] YES / [ ] NO

If NO, please justify:

* On which platform are the raw data stored?

- [X] researcher PC

- [X] research group file server

- [ ] other (specify): ...

* Who has direct access to the raw data (i.e., without intervention of another person)?

- [X] main researcher

- [X] responsible ZAP (as the data is stored on the research group file server, the data is available for both the main researcher and its supervisor)

- [ ] all members of the research group

- [ ] all members of UGent

- [ ] other (specify): ...

3b. Other files

---

* Which other files have been stored?

- [X] file(s) describing the transition from raw data to reported results. Specify: This can be found in the methodology section of the article.

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- [X] file(s) containing analyses. Specify: See findings section in the article. Also, a file with the preliminary results is also available on my PC as well as on the research group file server, in Dutch.

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- [ ] other: ...

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- [X] main researcher

- [X] responsible ZAP

- [ ] all members of the research group

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APPENDIX II

NEDERLANDSTALIGE SAMENVATTING

De voorbije decennia werd het sociaal werk wereldwijd geconfronteerd met een toenemende vraag naar het verzamelen en registreren van gegevens over cliënten, het handelen van professionals en het reilen en zeilen van organisaties die hulp- en dienstverlening aanbieden (Garrett, 2005; Hall, Parton, Peckover, & White, 2010; Hudson, 2002; Parrot & Madoc-Jones, 2008; Parton, 2006). Deze roep om meer informatie werd kracht bijgezet door de toenemende technische mogelijkheden van informatie- en communicatietechnologie (ICT) (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Bradt, Roose, Bouverne-De Bie, & De Schryver, 2011; Hill & Shaw, 2011; Keymolen & Broeders, 2013; Parton, 2006, 2009). Ondanks sociaal werk haar historische terughoudend om gebruik te maken van dergelijke technologische ontwikkelingen, hebben Elektronische Informatie Systemen (EISs) er de laatste jaren vlot hun ingang gevonden (Gillingham, 2011; Hudson, 2002; Munro, 2005; Parton, 2008). Deze EISs omvatten zowel systemen die mee helpen om beslissingen te maken, risico's in te schatten en dossiers op te maken als om trajecten van cliënten gedetailleerd op te volgen (Carrilio, 2005; Cleaver et al., 2008; Garrett, 2005; Gillingham, 2011, 2015; Hill & Shaw, 2011; Keymolen & Broeders, 2013; White, Wastell, Broadhurst, & Hall, 2010). Dit heeft onder meer geleid tot de implementatie van de Client Relationship Information System for Service Providers (CRISSP) in Australië, de Barns Behov I Centrum (BBIC) in Zweden, de Verwijsindex Risicojongeren (VIR) in Nederland en het Integrated Children System (ICS) alsook het Common Assessment Framework (CAF) in Engeland (Carlstedt & Jacobsson, 2017; Gillingham, 2011; Laming, 2003; Lecluijze, 2015; White, Hall, & Peckover, 2009). Dit is niet anders in Vlaanderen waar de structurele hervorming van het jeugdhulplandschap in 2014 naar de Integrale Jeugdhulp (IJH) gepaard ging met de introductie van het Informaticasysteem voor de Intersectorale Toegangspoort (INSISTO), de verderzetting van Dossier Opvolging Minderjarigen (DOMINO) en de vernieuwing van Begeleiding In Cijfers (BINC) (Vanhee, 2014).

Diverse actoren (e.g. Carrilio, 2005; De Meersman, 2010; Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008; Van Yperen, 1996) hebben reeds aangegeven dat het gebruik van EISs verschillende voordelen met zich meebrengt en een belangrijke kennisbron vormt voor zowel praktijkontwikkeling, organisatorische doeleinden als beleidsvoering (Aronson & Smith, 2010; Garrett, 2003; Hall et al., 2010; Parton, 2000). Deze systemen zijn namelijk in staat zijn om 'de intensiteit, duur, locatie, frequentie en andere details te capteren van datgene "wat plaats vindt"' (Carrilio, 2005, p. 45). Diezelfde auteurs gaan er onder meer mede hierdoor vanuit dat de data die gegenereerd wordt door deze systemen kan bijdragen aan de kwaliteit van het sociaal werk door responsief te handelen ten

aanzien van de noden van de cliënt en zijn/haar familie (De Meersman, 2010; Hill & Shaw, 2011; Van Yperen, 1996, 2013). Zo wordt er onder meer verwezen naar de wijze waarop EISs gegevens verzamelen over cliëntervaringen en de dialoog tussen (jonge) cliënten en professionals versterken door nieuwe communicatiekanalen aan te wenden waarin cliënten beter dan voorheen hun eigen verhaal kwijt kunnen (Carrilio, 2005; Sapey, 1997; Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008). Dit wordt als een belangrijk element beschouwd binnen een ontwikkeling naar een responsief sociaal werk dat immers opgevat wordt als een dialogische praktijk (Oostrik, 2010; Parton, O'Bryne, & Van Nijnatten, 2007), die aansluiting maakt bij de leefwereld van cliënten (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009) en waarin probleemgebieden en bezorgdheden in overleg met elkaar worden geconstrueerd (Aas, 2004; Oostrik, 2010; Parton et al., 2007; Parton, 2009).

Tegelijkertijd zijn andere auteurs (bijvoorbeeld Tregeagle & Darcy 2008) er ook van overtuigd dat EISs de capaciteit hebben om toegankelijke informatie aan te leveren over de hulpverleningspraktijk. Op die manier bieden EISs de mogelijkheid om datgene wat gebeurt op het niveau van de hulpverlening zichtbaar en transparant te maken ten aanzien van de cliënt, collega-hulpverleners, andere organisaties, de overheid en de samenleving (Gillingham, 2015; Van Yperen, 1996, 2013). Ook dit wordt als een belangrijk element beschouwd binnen een ontwikkeling naar responsief sociaal werk. Responsief sociaal werk construeert namelijk opvattingen van problemen op basis van verhalen van cliënten, waarbij de complexiteit van hun problematiek zichtbaar wordt gemaakt (McBeath, Jolles, Chuang, Bunger, & Collins-Camargo, 2014; Van Nijnatten, 2004). Onderzoek toont daarenboven aan dat de kennis waarop responsief sociaal werk zich baseert steeds opnieuw onderhandeld wordt in relatie tot de complexiteit van elke concrete situatie (Evans, 2010), en geen vast gedefinieerd gegeven is (Moss & Dahlberg, 2005). Een noodzakelijke voorwaarde om dit te doen is uiteraard dat deze complexiteit in beeld kan gebracht worden. Volgens verschillende auteurs (Carrilio, 2005; De Meersman, 2010) zijn EISs perfect in staat om dit te doen gezien hun structuur professionals aanmoedigt om expliciet aandacht te besteden aan de verschillende levensdomeinen en zo de complexiteit van de cliënt zijn/haar situatie zichtbaar in beeld te brengen.

Ondanks deze positieve geluiden omtrent het gebruik en de mogelijkheden van EISs in het sociaal werk, toont recent onderzoek aan dat EISs sociaal werk dreigt te reduceren tot een louter technische praktijk. Hierbij ligt de focus op beheersbaarheid en voorspelbaarheid, wat een ontwikkeling naar responsief

sociaal werk discrediteert (Aronson & Smith, 2010; Tsui & Cheung, 2004; Webb, 2006). In de bestaande internationale theorievorming worden verschillende oorzaken geïdentificeerd die verklaren waarom dergelijke systemen sociaal werk dreigen te reduceren tot een technische praktijk. Zo wordt onder meer verwezen naar de ontwikkeling richting New Public Management (NPM) waar managerialistische principes van beheersbaarheid en voorspelbaarheid centraal staan (Evans & Harris, 2004; Tsui & Cheung, 2004). Daarnaast zorgt het probleem van voorstructurering (De Vos & Kabergs, 2005) waarbij opvattingen over de problemen van cliënten gereduceerd worden tot deelproblemen en daardoor hun complexiteit verliezen (Bradt et al., 2011; Lorenz, 2007; Webb, 2006) ervoor dat de kennis waarop sociaal werkers zich baseren, gereduceerd wordt tot de logica van de database: enkel wat ingevuld kan worden in de EISs is, is nog zichtbaar en bediscussieerbaar (Parton, 2008). Ook het proces van decontextualisering waarbij sociaal werk onder invloed van registratie voornamelijk lijkt te focussen op de individuele kenmerken van cliënten en veel minder op de context waarin deze kenmerken zich manifesteren is zorgwekkend omdat responsief sociaal werk net aandachtig is voor de ruimere sociale context en niet alleen voor de individuele kenmerken van cliënten (Specht & Courtney, 1994; Hall et al., 2010). Tegelijkertijd uitten onderzoekers hun bezorgdheid over het inzetten van registratie als een vorm van sociale controle en rijzen er vragen omtrent de impact van EISs op de privacy van cliënten (Garrett, 2005; Parton, 2008; Keymolen & Broeders, 2013). Tot slot toont onderzoek ook aan dat de sociaal werker evolueert naar een screen-level bureaucraat (Van Nijnatten, 2004). Eerder dan beschikbaar te zijn voor de cliënt, heeft deze screen-level bureaucraat minimaal contact met de cliënt wat het moeilijk maakt voor sociaal werkers om op een betekenisvolle wijze te interageren met hun cliënten (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Pithouse et al., 2012; White et al., 2010).

Niettegenstaande deze risico's wel degelijk onze aandacht verdienen, toont onderzoek aan dat het sociaal werk er niet vanzelfsprekend door wordt gedetermineerd (Aas, 2004; Lecluijze, 2015; Parton, 2006; Tsui & Cheung, 2004; White et al., 2009). Steeds vaker stellen deze onderzoekers vast hoe voornamelijk frontliniewerkers, maar ook managers hun discretionaire ruimte gebruiken om te weerstaan aan de mogelijke reductie van hun praktijk tot een technische aangelegenheid (e.g. De Witte, Declercq, & Hermans, 2015; Evans & Harris, 2004; Evans, 2011; Huuskonen & Vakkari, 2013). Dit toont aan dat sociaal werkorganisaties en de professionals die er werkzaam zijn zich ten aanzien van de vermelde risico's en de implementatie van EISs op diverse manieren positioneren (Bradt et al., 2011). Het is dan ook belangrijk om een

onderzoeksagenda op te maken die ons inzicht kan geven in de actuele veranderingen in het sociaal werk (Garrett, 2005).. Op basis van de huidige ontwikkelingen die mee de implementatie van EISs stimuleren, de positieve en negatieve gevolgen van EISs voor het sociaal werk alsook de spanning die optreedt tussen responsief en technisch sociaal werk en de wijze waarop deze spanning gehanteerd wordt, is dat dan ook exact wat wij gedaan hebben. We zijn er dan ook van overtuigd dat deze onderzoeksagenda dient te vertrekken vanuit de relatie tussen EISs en de ontwikkeling naar responsief sociaal werk in een context waar EISs als belangrijk worden ervaren om dit responsief sociaal werk te ontwikkelen. Daarnaast is het onze overtuiging dat dergelijke onderzoeksagenda drievoudig dient te zijn en zowel het domein van het beleid, de organisaties als de praktijk dient te beslaan, gezien op deze drie niveaus lacunes aanwezig zijn in de bestaande theorievorming met betrekking tot de ontwikkeling naar responsief sociaal werk in een context van EISs.

Een eerste lacune en onderzoeksagenda situeert zich op het beleidsniveau. Zoals we reeds eerder beargumenteerden, biedt de huidige context van NPM en risicobeheersing ons één mogelijke verklaring voor de actuele aandacht voor EISs. Echter, tot op heden hebben we geen empirisch inzicht in de redenen waarom overheden geneigd zijn om in te zetten op de implementatie van EISs in het sociaal werk. Dit verklaart ook waarom het huidige debat vervat zit in een zwart-wit denken waarbij overheden en beleidsmakers vaak a priori beschouwd worden als boemannen die systemen installeren die het sociaal werk dreigen te reduceren tot een technische praktijk, en dit vooral doen vanuit eigen belang. Dit noopte ons er dan ook toe om eerst en vooral duidelijkheid te verschaffen in de beleidslogica om EISs te installeren en in tweede instantie ook inzicht te verschaffen in de wijze waarop beleidsmakers die mee de ontwikkeling richting EISs sturen, kijken naar deze ontwikkeling en wat hun motieven hieromtrent zijn.

Een tweede lacune en onderzoeksagenda situeert zich op het organisatieniveau. Vandaag wordt namelijk ontzettend veel aandacht besteed aan het afleggen van verantwoording ten aanzien van zowel cliënten, mede-professionals, organisaties, overheden en de samenleving in haar geheel. Vaak wordt gebruik gemaakt van EISs om die verantwoording af te leggen en in beeld te brengen. In dit verhaal worden managers - lees: leidinggevenden van organisaties - als belangrijke actoren beschouwd gezien zij verantwoordelijk zijn voor de implementatie van EISs binnen hun eigen organisatie (Carrilio, 2008; Pallot, 1999). Deze managers worden vaak op één lijn geplaatst met het beleid en worden gepercipieerd als voorstanders van EISs die uitvoeren wat het beleid

hen vraagt. Onderzoek (e.g. Evans, 2011; Shanks, Lundström, & Wiklund, 2015) toont echter aan dat het deze visie aan nuance ontbreekt daar ook managers hun discretionaire ruimte aanwenden wanneer zij het gevoel hebben dat systemen zoals EISs hun praktijk dreigen te reduceren tot een technische praktijk. Desalniettemin is er nog steeds een tekort aan empirisch onderzoek dat inzicht geeft in hoe managers kijken naar de ontwikkeling richting EISs binnen hun organisatie en zeker in relatie tot het afleggen van verantwoording.

Een derde en laatste lacune tot slot leidt tot een onderzoeksagenda op het niveau van de concrete sociaal werkpraktijk. We gaven reeds eerder aan dat diverse auteurs beweren dat het gebruik van EISs leidt tot een responsieve sociaal werkpraktijk waarin zowel het narratieve karakter van het sociaal werk als de vraag naar transparantie tot zijn recht komt (De Meersman, 2010; Harlow & Webb, 2003; Hill & Shaw, 2011; Van Yperen, 1996, 2013). Heel wat onderzoek toonde reeds aan dat dit met betrekking tot het narratieve karakter niet noodzakelijk het geval is (Aas, 2004; Lash, 2002; Manovich, 2001). Met betrekking tot de idee dat het gebruik van EISs leidt tot een transparante praktijk is op dit moment echter nog weinig onderzoek voorhanden dat ons inzicht geeft in de relatie tussen EISs en zichtbaar maken wat gebeurt 'op het terrein. Het onderzoek dat reeds voorhanden is en betrekking heeft op de concrete sociaal werkpraktijk wijst dan weer voornamelijk op het gebruik van discretionaire ruimte en strategieën door praktijkwerkers om de vanuit overheidswege opgelegde eis tot gebruik van EISs enigszins om te buigen (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Evans, 2010; Evans, 2011, 2013; Evans & Hardy, 2010). Vaak wordt het gebruik van deze strategieën aangemoedigd omdat ze de kwaliteit van het sociaal werk zouden verbeteren en zelfs zouden leiden tot responsief sociaal werk. Desalniettemin werd de betekenis van deze strategieën in relatie tot het ontwikkelen van responsief sociaal werk tot op heden niet bestudeerd.

Dit alles leidt dan ook tot de volgende onderzoeksvragen:

- Welke zijn de beleidsmatige logica's om EISs te implementeren en hoe verhouden deze rationale zich tot de ontwikkeling van responsief sociaal werk?

- Welke zijn de motieven, visies en discours van beleidsactoren die de basis vormen voor de implementatie van EISs en wat is de betekenis hiervan voor de ontwikkeling van responsief sociaal werk?

- Op welke wijze hanteren managers de vanuit overheidswege opgelegde eis tot registratie in hun organisatie?

- Welke zijn de motieven, visies en discours van managers met betrekking tot de vanuit overheidswege opgelegde eis tot registratie om verantwoording af te leggen?

- Op welke wijze hanteren praktijkwerkers de vanuit overheidswege opgelegde eis tot registratie in hun organisatie?

- Welke zijn de motieven, visies en discours van praktijkwerkers met betrekking tot de vanuit overheidswege opgelegde eis tot registratie om transparantie te brengen?

- Wat is de betekenis van de strategieën die praktijkwerkers hanteren voor de ontwikkeling van responsief sociaal werk wanneer zij proberen om de vanuit overheidswege opgelegde eis tot registratie te omzeilen of om te buigen?

De context waarin deze onderzoeksvragen behandeld werden is de Vlaamse jeugdhulpverlening. Deze sector is de voorbije jaren namelijk sterk onderhevig geweest aan diverse hervormingen die allemaal tot doel hadden om de kwaliteit van de jeugdhulp te verbeteren. Het schetsen van een uitgebreid historisch kader zou ons te ver leiden binnen dit samenvattend gedeelte, maar essentieel is dat de Vlaamse jeugdhulpverlening in 2014 opnieuw een organisatorische en vooral structurele hervorming kende waarin de hulpverlening werd gemoduleerd, crisisnetwerken werden ontplooid en een onderscheid werd gemaakt tussen rechtstreeks en niet-rechtstreekse toegankelijke jeugdhulp. Deze laatste vorm is enkel en alleen toegankelijk via de Intersectorale Toegangspoort (ITP). Om toegang te verschaffen tot de niet-rechtstreeks toegankelijke jeugdhulp dient een hulpverlener samen met de jongere in kwestie een aanmeldingsdocument (A-DOC) in te dienen via het Informaticasysteem voor de Intersectorale Toegangspoort (INSISTO). Dit A-DOC kan beschouwd worden als een omvattend digitaal document waarin de levensdomeinen van de jongere aan bod komen, aangevuld met diagnostische gegevens, identificatiegegevens en de visie van de betrokken actoren. Dit A-DOC komt terecht bij het team Indicatiestelling dat op basis van dit document oordeelt of de jongere in kwestie effectief nood heeft aan niet-rechtstreeks toegankelijke jeugdhulpverlening en welke hulpverleningsvorm het meest aangewezen is. Indien zij bijkomende vragen hebben, kunnen zij het A-DOC ter verheldering

terugsturen naar de hulpverlener die het heeft ingediend. Indien zij akkoord gaan met de vraag van de hulpverlener zullen zij het A-DOC bezorgen aan het team jeugdhulpregie die een geschikt aanbod zoekt binnen het bestaande jeugdhulplandschap (Flemish Government, 2004; Vanhee, 2014). Deze korte schets toont vooral aan waarom de Vlaamse jeugdhulpverlening een geschikte onderzoekscontext was gezien INSISTO en het A-DOC een centrale rol inneemt in de ganse hervorming richting Integrale Jeugdhulp.

In de zoektocht naar beleidsmatige logica's om EISs te implementeren in het sociaal werk werden eerst en vooral alle beleidsdocumenten met betrekking tot het onderwerp van EISs en met betrekking tot de Integrale Jeugdhulp bestudeerd. Hieruit bleek dat de Vlaamse overheid erop rekent dat de geïmplementeerde EISs voor meer uniformiteit zullen zorgen over de diverse voorzieningen heen, vraag en aanbod beter op elkaar zullen afstemmen en voorzieningen zal bijstaan om verantwoording af te leggen van datgene wat ze aanvangen met de publieke middelen die ze toebedeeld krijgen. Deze op het eerste zicht perfect legitieme logica's roepen echter wel een aantal substantiële bedenkingen op met betrekking tot de ontwikkeling naar responsief sociaal werk. Zo zijn de logica's om vraag en aanbod op elkaar af te stemmen en meer uniformiteit te creëren binnen het jeugdhulplandschap vooral vervat in een streven naar meer efficiëntie terwijl het afleggen van verantwoording aan de hand van EISs dan weer op een hulpverleningsvreemde logica gebeurt. Een ontwikkeling naar responsief sociaal werk vraagt daarentegen dat onder meer de afstemming van vraag en aanbod onderhandeld wordt met de cliënt, dat rekening gehouden wordt met de individuele leefsituatie van de cliënt en dat het afleggen van verantwoording niet gebeurt op louter economische gronden.

Deze eerste inzichten noopten ons ertoe om verder te kijken dan de inhoud van statische beleidsdocumenten en 18 centrale beleidsactoren binnen het veld van IJH te bevragen via semi-gestructureerde interviews. Op het eerste zicht bevestigen deze beleidsactoren de gevonden beleidsmatige logica's om EISs te implementeren in de sociaal werkpraktijk. Zo verwijzen ze onder meer naar administratieve (versnellen van hulpverleningsproces en vermijden van papierwerk), beleidsmatige (afstemmen vraag en aanbod, informatie verzamelen), hulpverlenende (cliëntparticipatie verhogen, risicobeheersing) en economische (efficiëntie verhogen, subsidie-toewijzing, verantwoording afleggen) logica's. Verrassend was echter hoe diezelfde beleidsmakers naast het formuleren van logica's die de beleidsmatige keuze om EISs te implementeren, verantwoorden, ook heel wat bedenkingen formuleren bij diezelfde keuze. Zo uiten de beleidsmakers onder meer de bezorgdheid dat het gebruik van EISs

poogt om een sociaal werk praktijk te reduceren tot een objectieve en rationele praktijk terwijl volgens hen sociaal werk een dialogische en zelfs therapeutische praktijk omvat. Tegelijkertijd stellen zij zich vragen over het nut van deze tools en de wijze waarop professionals ermee dienen om te gaan. Het is dan ook in die context dat de bevraagde beleidsmakers de opmerkelijke hoop uitspreken dat professionals alsook organisaties een gezond evenwicht bereiken tussen het volgen van beleidsmatige procedures omtrent het gebruik van EISs en het ontwikkelen van een responsieve sociaal werkpraktijk.

Het ambigue discours dat beleidsactoren hier opzetten, weerspiegelt de teneur onder de 30 managers vanuit zowel de brede instap als niet-rechtstreeks toegankelijke voorzieningen. Zij werden bevraagd om na te gaan op welke wijze zij de vanuit overheidswege opgelegde eis tot registratie hanteren en welke hun motieven, visies en discours zijn met betrekking tot het afleggen van verantwoording aan de hand van EISs. Op het eerste zicht uiten weinig managers problemen met de groeiende vraag om verantwoording af te leggen over datgene wat de hulpverleners die werkzaam zijn in hun organisatie aanvangen met de ontvangen publieke middelen. Zij ervaren deze vraag als legitiem en zien ook een aantal voordelen in het gebruik van EISs om deze verantwoording af te leggen en zichtbaar te maken. Zo geven zij aan dat dergelijk systeem en in dit geval INSISTO en de structuur van het A-DOC hen en de sociaal werkers in hun organisatie ertoe aanzet om langer en kritischer dan voorheen stil te staan bij de vraag of ingrijpende en duurdere hulpverlening wel noodzakelijk is. Deze positieve tendens maakte echter vrij vlug plaats voor een aantal ernstige bedenkingen bij het gebruik van EISs om verantwoording af te leggen. De meest centrale bedenking hierbij is dat het afleggen van verantwoording volledig ingebed is in de logica van de database. Met andere woorden: enkel voor datgene wat gecapteerd wordt door het EIS kan nog verantwoording worden afgelegd. Dit zorgt volgens de managers niet alleen voor een reductie van de realiteit, maar ook voor het zoeken naar strategieën om het omgaan met EISs op een andere manier te benaderen dan vooropgesteld binnen de huidige regelgeving. Deze managers ontwikkelen dan ook zelf, en staan hun hulpverleners toe om strategieën te ontwikkelen door bijvoorbeeld een aantal zaken niet op te nemen binnen het EIS, om bepaalde probleemgebieden extra in de verf te zeten of om zogenaamde objectieve criteria op een andere wijze te benaderen. Dit leidt er ons dan ook toe te besluiten dat deze managers niet als louter en alleen als beleidsuitvoerders beschouwd kunnen worden, maar als mede betekenisverleners en vormgevers aan het uitgezette beleid. Niet in het minst omdat zij pleiten voor een reflexieve benadering van verantwoording waarbij de verantwoording voor het handelen

van hun organisatie en hulpverleners niet gereduceerd wordt tot de logica van de database, maar in overleg en dialoog gebeurt met de cliënt en alle andere betrokken actoren. Dit laatste impliceert dan ook de vraag af te kunnen afwijken van de opgezette procedures en hiervoor ook verantwoording te kunnen afleggen.

Het creëren van strategieën om af te wijken van de bestaande regelgeving en opgelegde procedures omtrent het gebruik van EISs is geen exclusieve bevoegdheid van managers. Dit werd duidelijk wanneer 16 leden van de indicatiestellingteams in Vlaanderen bevraagd werden via semi-gestructureerde interviews om zicht te krijgen op welke wijze praktijkwerkers de opgelegde eis tot registratie hanteren en welke hun motieven, visies en discours zijn met betrekking tot die eis om transparantie te brengen. Tijdens de interviews valt op hoe zij een aantal voordelen zien aan het gebruik van EISs om zichtbaar te maken wat plaats vindt in de concrete sociaal werkpraktijk. Vanuit een beleidsperspectief zijn zij ervan overtuigd dat EISs data kan genereren die inzicht geeft in ontwikkelingen binnen de jeugdzorg. Vanuit een organisatorisch perspectief biedt EISs dan weer de mogelijkheid om informatie op een snelle en veilige manier te delen tussen organisaties onderling. Vanuit een professioneel standpunt kan een EIS ervoor zorgen dat de visie van alle betrokken actoren opgenomen wordt, wat de ontwikkeling van een tunnelvisie tegengaat. Vanuit een cliëntperspectief wijzen de praktijkwerkers dan weer op het verhogend participatief karakter van de hulpverlening door - in dit geval - het A-DOC samen in te vullen. Van belang is echter hoe deze praktijkwerkers aangeven dat het gebruik van EISs evenzeer het handelen van een sociaal werkpraktijk onzichtbaar maakt. Dit wordt geïllustreerd wanneer zij uitleggen hoe moeilijk het is om binnen een EIS de nodige nuances aan te brengen die precies zorgen voor een transparant overzicht van de cliënt zijn situatie. Het gevolg hiervan is dat deze praktijkwerkers zich gedwongen voelen om strategieën te ontwikkelen, zoals telefonisch contact opnemen met de aanmelder, een oogje dichtknijpen wanneer bepaalde elementen ontbreken of de problematiek van de cliënt extra in de verf zetten om op die manier responsief te kunnen handelen ten aanzien van de noden van de cliënt en zijn/haar familie. Dit sluit quasi naadloos aan bij onze laatste onderzoeksvraag naar de betekenis van deze strategieën die praktijkwerkers hanteren voor de ontwikkeling van responsief sociaal werk. Het onderzoek toont duidelijk aan dat de praktijkwerkers strategieën hanteren om onder meer een proces van decontextualisatie tegen te gaan alsook om het narratieve karakter van het sociaal werk te bewaken. In die zin pogen de gehanteerde strategieën om responsief te handelen ten aanzien van de cliënt. Er zit op dit vlak echter ook

een adder onder het gras. De gehanteerde strategieën zijn gericht op het creëren van een professionele relatie met de cliënt. Dit relationeel karakter is uiteraard eigen aan het sociaal werk en staat er ook centraal, maar de adder onder het gras is dat de gehanteerde strategieën zich ook beperken tot het creëren van deze professionele relatie. In het kader van een ontwikkeling richting responsief sociaal werk roept dit een aantal vragen op. Dergelijke ontwikkeling vraagt namelijk ook dat rekening wordt gehouden met niet-relationele, maar bredere sociaal-politieke vraagstukken waarbij een evenwicht wordt gevonden tussen het aangaan van een persoonlijk engagement met de cliënt enerzijds en aandachtig zijn voor bredere principes zoals gelijkheid en solidariteit anderzijds. De exclusieve aandacht voor het aangaan van een persoonlijk engagement met de cliënt leidt er ons dan ook toe te concluderen dat deze strategieën niet noodzakelijk bijdragen tot de ontwikkeling van responsief sociaal werk omdat de sociaal-politieke component van een responsieve sociaal werkpraktijk uit het oog wordt verloren.

We stellen dan ook vast dat de jeugdhulp in Vlaanderen gelijkenissen vertoont met een mijnenveld. Vanuit het perspectief van de buitenstaander is alles ogenschijnlijk rustig. De jeugdhulp maakt door de inzet van EISs een inhaalbeweging en sluit de technische ontwikkelingen en de daarbij gepaard gaande voordelen voor zowel beleid, organisaties, professionals als cliënt in de armen. Echter, wie zich beweegt in het jeugdhulplandschap zoals wij deden in dit onderzoek, merkt al snel dat het bezaaid is met een aantal gebieden die eerder explosief van aard zijn en zeker in relatie tot de ontwikkeling van responsief sociaal werk. Niet zozeer omdat ons onderzoek bevestigt wat we reeds wisten. Met name dat het hanteren van EISs als ontzettend tijdrovend en administratief belastend wordt ervaren door de gebruikers van deze systemen, maar ook door de beleidsmakers en managers die betrokken werden bij ons onderzoek.

Wel omdat de wijdverspreide implementatie van EISs baadt in een sfeer van illusies. Zo wegen de voordelen van EISs om transparantie te creëren niet op tegen de nadelen die aangegeven werden door de praktijkwerkers. Die nadelen wijzen er namelijk op dat het gebruik van dergelijke systemen het werk van praktijkwerkers onzichtbaar heeft gemaakt. Het wegwerken van deze nadelen is trouwens geen kwestie van meer opleiding en betere training, noch van het bijschaven van de systemen zelf. De praktijkwerkers toonden namelijk aan dat ze zich gedwongen voelen om ondergronds te gaan en verzetsstrategieën te ontwikkelen omdat de logica van de database, die inherent is aan EISs, hen niet toelaat om hun professionele waarden en normen die erop gericht zijn cliënten

te helpen, in de praktijk te brengen. De idee dat EISs transparantie zullen creëren en zichtbaar zullen maken wat gebeurt 'op de grond' is bijgevolg een illusie.

Hetzelfde geldt voor de idee dat EISs organisaties en professionals zullen bijstaan om verantwoording af te leggen. Tijdens de gesprekken met managers werd ook daar de bezorgdheid geuit dat die verantwoording volledig ingebed is in de logica van de database. Dit zorgt voor een bureaucratische benadering van verantwoording waarbij enkel datgene wat geregistreerd wordt, verantwoord kan worden. Opnieuw is het hier geen kwestie om de gebruikers van EISs beter op te leiden zodat ze de systemen correcter invullen. Integendeel, het probleem is dat dergelijke systemen geen reflexieve benadering van verantwoording toelaten waarbij verantwoording afgelegd wordt door constant te reflecteren over wat noodzakelijk is voor de cliënt en dit ook in overleg en onderhandeling met de desbetreffende cliënt te doen. Nochtans staat zo'n reflexieve benadering centraal in een ontwikkeling naar responsief sociaal werk.

Deze illusies roepen de vraag op hoe het komt dat overheden, maar ook organisaties wereldwijd toch massaal blijven inzetten op dergelijke systemen. Het antwoord op die vraagt ligt in de idee dat EISs de mogelijkheid hebben om de sociaal werkpraktijk te standaardiseren en te reguleren door onder meer een voorgestructureerde structuur aan te bieden. Als gevolg hiervan denkt men al te vaak dat EISs sociaal werk zal objectiveren en rationaliseren omdat ze de ruimte om fouten te maken verkleinen wat als ontzettend belangrijk wordt ervaren in een context waar risicobeheersing belangrijk is (Baines, 2010; Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Carrillio, 2008, Munro, 2004; Parton, 1998). Ook dit is echter een illusie want deze zogenaamd neutrale, objectieve en rationele EISs zijn alles behalve neutraal. Dergelijke systemen zijn niet zomaar machines die hulpverleners en managers bijstaan om hun taak te vervullen. De beleidslogica's om EISs te installeren toonden namelijk al aan dat deze systemen artefacten zijn van een toenemende context van bureaucratisering en risicobeheersing. Ze leunen als gevolg hiervan ook sterk aan bij managerialistische waarden wat problematisch is gezien dergelijke waarden sterk contrasteren met professionele waarden. Een bijkomende bedenking hierbij is de heersende illusie dat sociaal werk waardenvrij, rationeel of objectief zou moeten zijn. We wezen er reeds eerder op, maar sociaal werk is ingebed in een situatie waarin het zich dient te positioneren tussen het publieke (staat) en het private (individu). Dit zorgt voor een ambigue situatie die eigen is aan het sociaal werk en die niet toelaat om op een neutrale, laat staan objectieve

manier aan hulpverlening te doen. Deze ambigue situatie vraagt namelijk om constant afwegingen te maken, maar ook om de ambiguïteit zelf te (h)erkennen en te omarmen.

Het is dan ook hier dat een nieuwe bezorgdheid opduikt. De geïmplementeerde EISs laten niet toe om deze ambiguïteit te omarmen gezien ze ingebed zijn in een technisch, rationeel en objectief geloof. Dit verklaart dan ook waarom het verhaal van zowel beleidsmakers, managers en praktijkwerkers in ons onderzoek zo ambigue is. Enerzijds zij zijn voorstander van meer transparantie, het afleggen van het verantwoording en het gebruik maken van nieuwe technologische middelen. Anderzijds laten deze systemen niet toe om af te wijken van voorgestructureerde procedures, wat net noodzakelijk is om het ambigue karakter van sociaal werk te omarmen. Als gevolg hiervan gaan managers en hulpverleners ondergronds en ontwikkelen ze verzetsstrategieën om die ambiguïteit te behouden. Het probleem hierbij is echter dat ze door ondergronds te handelen, heel wat zaken niet meer zichtbaar maken en er ook geen verantwoording kan voor afgelegd worden. Deze vicieuze cirkel leidt er dan ook toe dat we mijlenver verwijderd zijn van een ontwikkeling naar responsief sociaal werk. Een eerste stap hierbij zou namelijk zijn om die ambiguïteit te erkennen en ook zichtbaar toe te laten. We zijn er op basis van ons onderzoek dat ook van overtuigd dat managers hierin een belangrijke rol kunnen spelen. Zij leunen namelijk sterk aan bij professionele waarden en normen, eerder dan managerialistische en bevinden zich daarenboven in een intermediaire positie tussen het beleid enerzijds en de praktijk anderzijds. Deze positie geeft hen heel wat mogelijkheden om de nood aan ambiguïteit over te brengen naar een diversiteit aan actoren.

Tot slot willen we voor de duidelijkheid nog even teruggrijpen naar onze centrale onderzoeksvraag, met name hoe een ontwikkeling naar responsief sociaal werk kan plaatsvinden in een context waar EISs alomtegenwoordig zijn. Het antwoord op de vraag is vrij helder: zo'n ontwikkeling kan niet plaatsvinden als EISs er verantwoordelijk voor zijn. Een ontwikkeling naar responsief sociaal werk vraagt namelijk dat een professionele relatie wordt opgezet met de cliënt waarbij de handelingen van de sociaal werker transparant worden gemaakt in een onderhandelingsproces met de cliënt en waarbij de verantwoording voor dat handelen ook wordt afgelegd in die dialoog. Tegelijkertijd vraagt een ontwikkeling naar responsief sociaal werk ook aandachtig te zijn voor het sociaal-politieke aspect van sociaal werk waarbij alle actoren een evenwicht dienen te vinden tussen de individuele noden van de cliënt en bredere samenlevingsprincipes van gelijkheid en solidariteit.

Dergelijke ontwikkeling kan op geen enkele manier gemaakt worden via EISs gezien deze systemen (i) niet transparant maken wat gebeurt in de sociaal werkpraktijk, (ii) hulpverleners en managers niet ondersteunen in een reflexieve benadering van verantwoording en (iii) het ambigue karakter van sociaal werk negeren.

De oplossing ligt niet in het beter opleiden van de gebruikers van deze systemen of in het compleet afschaffen ervan. Integendeel, één mogelijke oplossing ligt in een praktijkgerichte benadering van EISs (Hill & Shaw, 2011). Hierbij vertrekt men vanuit de vraag wat het sociaal werk nodig heeft om een responsieve praktijk te ontwikkelen en niet welke de oneindige mogelijkheden zijn van EISs om ze achteraf te implementeren in het sociaal werk, los van de vraag of ze enige voordelen bieden voor de sociaal werkpraktijk zelf.

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